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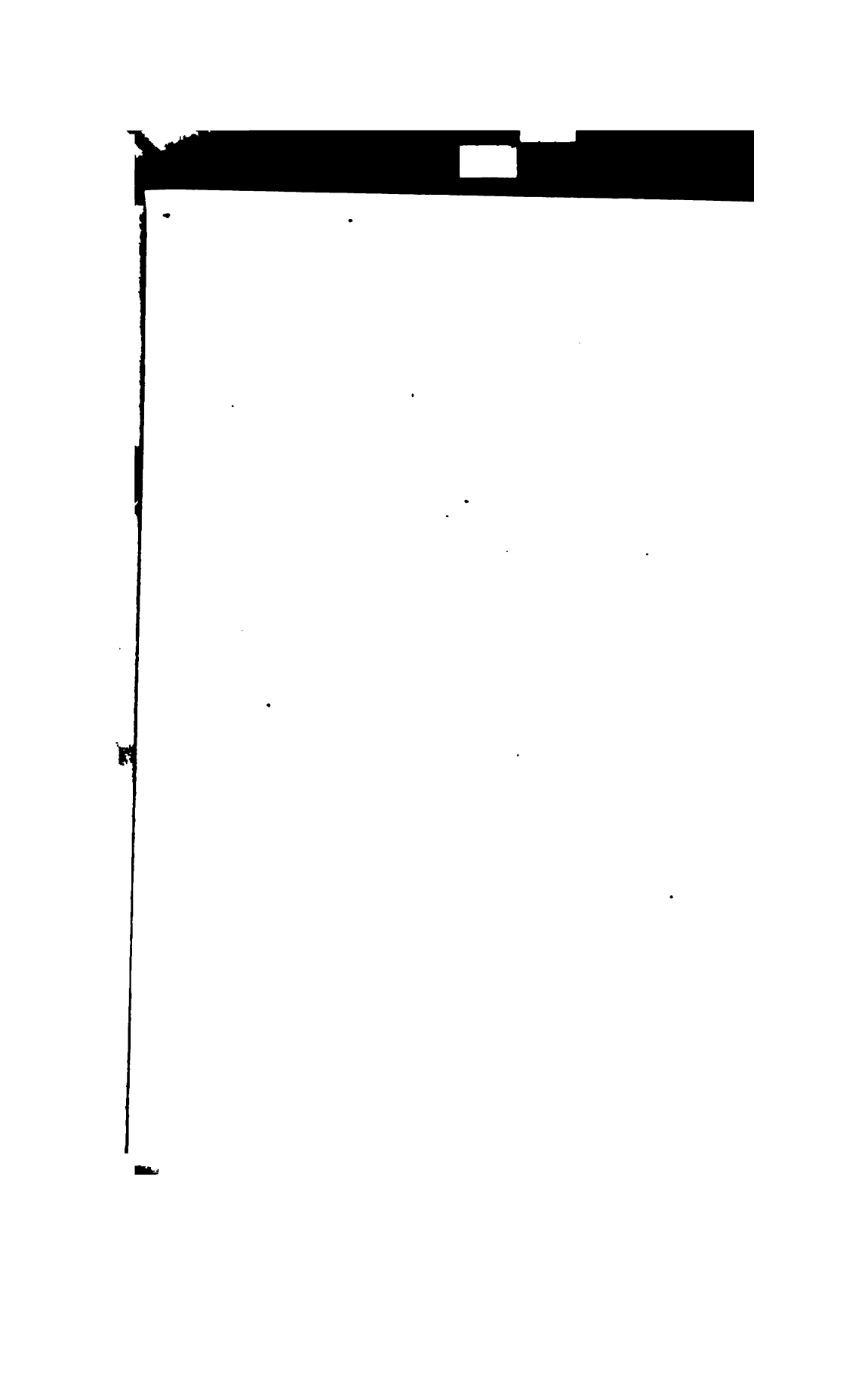

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The gay band entering the town from the West.

WILL SHAKESPEARE'S LITTLE LAD

BY

IMOGEN CLARK

A gallant child, one that indeed . . . makes old hearts fresh
—*The Winter's Tale*

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
REGINALD BIRCH

NEW YORK
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1916

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To

THE GOODLY FELLOWSHIP OF

SHAKESPEARE LOVERS

THIS SIMPLE

STORY OF HIS LITTLE LAD

IS DEDICATED

ILLUSTRATIONS

The gay band entering the town from the West — *Frontispiece*

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WILL SHAKESPEARE'S LITTLE LAD

CHAPTER I

They rose up early to observe
The rite of May.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

THERE was an air of alertness about the little town of Stratford-on-Avon that May morning in the year of grace 1596, and the thirty-eighth of the reign of good Queen Bess, though usually at such an early hour it was taking its last delicious doze, utterly unmindful of the world and its manifold duties.

But who could really sleep the first of May, even if the sun had not yet risen? Not the old people, surely, whose slumbers are light enough at any time and who, with all the mysterious noises of the previous night sounding in their ears, lived over again in a half-drowsy state the days when they, too, went a-Maying. Not the middle-aged people, who had buckled on the armour

of responsibility and had homes of their own to look after and children to care for, and so perforce must give up all those pleasing, foolish customs, though the spring breeze called wooingly to them and the early flowers beckoned with alluring fingers. Not the young people—Ah, no! There were no young people in Stratford, except the tiny, toddling things, and they were of small account as yet.

There was not a young person from ten to twenty years of age within the limits of the little town. The bells of Trinity had hardly ceased striking the midnight hour of the 30th of April, when shadowy figures of all sizes came from the houses lying in quiet lanes near the water-side, or in adjacent fields, and hastened to the market-place, the point of assembly, where the groups grew quickly. What laughter rang out upon the still, damp air—what shouts and songs! Tom Bardolph, the town-crier, jingled his bell from sheer joy, and called stridently to the stragglers whose forms could be seen from the steps of the Cross. The boys whistled and gave vent to their exuberant feelings in wild yells, while the older girls cried "Hush!" warningly, with little ripples of excited giggles drowning the severity of their tones. The river, slipping slowly past under the arches of Sir Hugh's great bridge, seemed suddenly to hold its breath in envy of all the delights

the young folk were shortly to know in the silent woods where the flowers were already on tiptoe with expectancy.

Who could sleep at such a time? Who could sleep later, when, with the blowing of horns and the cry of the pipes that grew each moment faint and fainter, the band of young people left the town and hastened toward the shadowy forest? And, above all, who could sleep in that sudden silence which, as it settled down, throbbed with memories of other times to the stay-at-homes, though the river went on with its drowsy lullaby among the sedges and there was no other sound abroad?

So it was small wonder that long before sunrise the good people were astir. They were as eager as children to see what manner of day it would be. The robin had sung blithely the previous afternoon, chirping forth cheery promises of sunshine and clear skies. That was a sign that never failed them! But still the grey clouds lay close, guarding the secret of the morning, though already there was a thrill of colour in the east, where the dawn was knocking to be let out.

After a short time that mysterious curtain stirred softly, and here, through an unguarded chink, and there through another, the young day peeped out at the world with a little golden light in her eyes, and then, grown bolder, she rent the

enveloping folds asunder and leaped forth, all radiant, rosy smiles.

The river, that had been a moving thread of darkness but a moment before, flashed on a sudden like a slender Spanish rapier drawn from its sheath; the meadows along the banks grew distinct; and the little, plaster-walled, thatched-roof cottages of the town, that had been so many dim, blurred shapes, stood out boldly, while here and there a small tuft of blue smoke rose from the chimneys of the thriftier householders and mingled with the dissolving clouds, and under the wizard's touch the gardens, with their flowering hedges and their fruit-trees white with bloom, were revealed.

The wooden spire of Trinity thrust its glittering tip into the glowing sky. It was the first thing to catch the light of the coming sun, which burst suddenly, wide-awake, upon the scene. A white-throat in a near-by elm, as if he had been the only one watching for this radiance, lifted his voice in gladness, but his song was lost in the sounds that came from the woods.

Hark! a shrill, sweet cry—the call of the pipes, the lower notes of the tabour, and then a gay mingling of men's and women's voices throbbing with the lilt of the tune, and, rising above them all, the high, childish trebles that carried the melody up—up into the blue. The distant sounds were borne

townward by the rollicking little breeze which was soft and warm, and yet as wayward as a lad's will as it loitered along, dropping vague hints of all the wonderful doings out there.

In a moment doors were flung wide and windows creaked under impatient hands. The keynote of the day was struck in that burst of music which the little breeze obligingly halted to chronicle. It came nearer and nearer. Even the sober-minded Puritans, of whom there were not a few in Stratford town, felt a quickening of their pulse as the songs grew more distinct. They might maintain at other times that this Maying was an abomination—a godless sport, a pagan custom—and yet, with its sweet hurly-burly at their very doors, they could not but remember that their ancestors, nay, even some of them themselves, had gone forth in this same fashion to greet the May, returning, as these young people were doing, in the early morning with the treasures of the woods heaped high in their arms.

Some such remembrance thrilled in their blood despite themselves, and the corners of their grim mouths relaxed a trifle, while some even went so far as to half-sing the words of the song over beneath their breath. Only some of them, however; there were others who listened sourly, and, as they hurried out with the rest to meet the incoming procession, their voices were raised in

loud denunciation and they threatened the dancers with lameness and broken legs, and saw no beauty whatever in the freshness of the day and the streets with their arches of flowers and vines.

Little, however, did the gay band, entering the town from the west, heed this grumbling, any more than one would feel disturbed by the buzzing of some discontented flies. The world was large enough to hold them all, and if these little black specks found fault with all the sweet bravery of spring and had no welcome for her, why, so much the worse for them that their eyes were holden to the beauty and that these rites seemed impious in their sight. There be many like them in every age, who, taking no enjoyment in the simple, sweet pleasures, and, indeed, reading their own crooked meaning therein, would away with them all. As if God can only be praised by long prayers and fasting, and sour, smileless faces. As if one does not know that He hath made the flowers and the singing birds and the sunshine, and that joy in them all and love and good-will to our kind are the best services we can render!

So, recking not of the adverse criticism about them, and seeing, indeed, only smiles upon the faces of the little crowd, the procession came proudly on, the men with the pipes and tabours leading the way, blowing and beating lustily. Back of them was a band of youths, their persons

decked out with vines. Some of them had bound wreaths of flowers upon their brows, others had gay blossoms tucked in their caps, and all wore nosegays, large and small, slipped into their jerkins. They rested their hands on one another's shoulders, and stretched out across the roadway in two wavering, brilliant lines, as they danced forward from side to side, singing ever as they came. Next in order a group of flower-crowned maidens, with summer in their faces and in their light, buoyant steps, made the air sweet with their merry music. Their arms were laden with fragrant branches and shy blossoms, which ever and anon they cast about them.

And then, with the shouts of scampering, crowding children, came the chiefest jewel—that which they had all gone forth to seek and were bringing home with pride and veneration. The stay-at-home people pressed close to see, the men tossing their little ones up on their shoulders that they might have a better view. A yoke of oxen (good Master George Badger's old Sure and Steady; they'd been away on this same errand to fetch the May-pole in a round dozen of years; it was little marvel, then, that to them was given the first place in the drawing!) stepped slowly by, each conscious footfall full of majesty. Then followed another yoke, and still again a third, and so on until a half-score were numbered by the

eager crowd. And what a transformation it was of the simple beasts—simple no longer, perdy! but tricked out with floating streamers and vines and with sweet nosegays tied on the tips of their horns. They were like the beasts of Fairyland, or those wondrous creatures on the painted cloths that used to adorn the walls of Charlecote House, before the owners turned Puritans and had them burned for popish reminders. And back of the last oxen was the rude, low platform set on wheels—especially made for this purpose—on which the giant of the forest lay supinely, stripped of all its branches, its wounds bound up with great bunches of flowers and herbs, with garlands of vines, and a hundred different floating ends of ribbons and cloth of various hues stretching from the top to the bottom. On either side of the cart walked a man holding in his hand a huge pronged stick, which, from time to time, he rested on the pole to keep it the better in its place; or anon he would shake it at the children to maintain some sort of order among them.

The crowd cheered stoutly as the long pole moved serenely by. Then, with much good-humoured elbowing and pushing, the people joined the throng of vine-laden devotees who were bringing up the rear, and so on and on, amidst a jangle of questions and answers and bursts of song, the whole procession took its way,

halting at last in Master Adrian Ford's meadow, near Cross Lane.

A score of men ran forward and closed about the cart. It was the work of a conjurer! In one moment the oxen were detached and led away; in another, strong hands were touching that fallen monarch with almost reverent tenderness. A boy, who had stood quietly by, now, at a sign from one of his elders, stepped proudly forward, and, kneeling upon the ground, bound at the very top of the pole the banner of England—the Red Cross of Saint George, then he moved back; and the band of men closed in again.

There was the sound of laughter and cries—quick commands—the place was cleared of people, then a tugging and straining went on among the men as the pole slipped into the hole prepared for it in the ground. It wavered uncertainly, as a ship will rock in the trough of the sea, but, after a brief moment's space, it stood firm and straight, a right brave, beautiful thing with all its flowers and ribbons. There was an instant of quiet, almost of suspense, among the watching folk, and then in a trice that same rollicking little breeze which had already done such good service that morning, tugged, boy-like, at the end of the pennon, blowing at it mischievously, whereat it slipped away and, bellying out, flaunted its undaunted splendour in the sunshine.

A sudden clapping of hands, like the crackling of a hungry fire, burst forth in greeting, and a great cheer sprang from the assembled people, a cheer that spread and spread even as the rings grow in the quiet waters at a stone's fall, until down in Old Town the chimes of Trinity answered merrily, and nearer the bell of the Holy Guild, in Chapel Lane, rang out right jovial peals of welcome. And high above the clamour of bells and fifes and tabours and the shrill blare of the trumpet came the cry as from one throat—the cry that so often had carried dismay and despair to England's foes in many a battle on sea and shore:

"Saint George for England—Saint George for Merrie England!"

CHAPTER II

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
AS YOU LIKE IT.

More matter for a May morning.
TWELFTH NIGHT.

BEFORE the sun was three hours high Master Adrian Ford's meadow bore no slightest resemblance to its usual tranquil aspect. On the softly rising knoll at its upper end stood the flag-tipped pole, with its ribbons and streamers fluttering in the morning air, as much at home in its new surroundings as if it had always been there and was, indeed, not a creature of a day but for all time. At its foot the ground was strewn with birch boughs and divers other branches, while here and there about the field, as if sprung up by magic, were leafy bowers and rude vine-trimmed booths, the latter erected by the tradesmen who, having a goodly eye for business, had left their stalls and shops in Middle Row and meant to take advantage that day of the country folk who would come from far and wide to join in the May sports and see the Morris danced.

There was a daring rogue of a pedler already upon the ground, who scented the air with his upturned nose as he passed the merchants' wares, disdaining, in especial, the attractions of the baker's stall, where there was a store of sugar, biscuits, and caraways, with all kinds of sweet suckers and comfits, laid out to tempt the appetite, and whither, even thus early, the small boys were pushing and jostling as they eyed each coveted dainty with longing looks. At one side of the booth the smiling proprietor stood, crying in his thick, suety voice:

"Walk up, roll up, tumble up, come up any way you can—here's cates to buy!"

The pedler gave the place a wide berth; he was getting in tune, too, for the day's work, and began to enumerate the contents of his pack with lungs which put the baker's vocal powers to shame:

"Ribbons, gloves, Sheffield whittles, women's gear and rings wi' posies, ballads, shoe-ties, table-books—come buy o' me! Who'll buy—who'll buy?"

He would keep it up all day and, at the end, he would go away with an empty pack and a full purse, for he was a merry-hearted wag with a tongue in his head that would draw kindness from a stone, one who, in truth, was well known in Stratford and all the country round at fairs

and wakes and greatly liked by the women, the maids especially. No fear that he'd let Ned or Diccon slip by without getting a fairing from his wares, and oh! the treasures he could disclose, and what an eye he had for a pretty face, and what a voice to sing you a song now!

Already, too, though it was far too early, the Morris dancers had gathered beneath the trees, taking their turn at a game of loggats. Robin Hood and Little John, in their tunics of Kendal green, with the bells about their ankles making a swift, keen music as they moved, had laid aside their bows as they matched their skill with the sticks, while the country bumpkins stood at a little distance gazing open-mouthed at the sport, or stealing furtive glances at Maid Marian, the Lady of the May, and marvelling among themselves that, despite her golden crown and her long robes, she should play at penny-prick with Friar Tuck, and beat him at it, too. She was a pretty wench and fair to see in that wonderful yellow gown, though their elder sisters could have told them that 'twas only Dame Turpin's cast kirtle after all, and, if they looked closer, they would know that Maid Marian was but young Peter Turf, he that lived at Dancing Marston and had run away from home this two years back.

The people came thronging in from all sides, and many of those who had been Maying in the

earlier morning quitted the field now, hastening to their homes to refresh themselves with food and drink and to trim their own houses with the forest's spoils before returning for the sports, which would continue till the sun went down.

Three children — two girls and a boy — detached themselves from the noisy group in front of the May-pole and hurried across the meadows and through the little, straggling lanes, their arms weighted with flowery branches. The girls, who were somewhat in advance, were dressed alike, in full kirtles of murrey-coloured homespun reaching almost to the ground, their jackets laced over white smocks. The short grey cloaks, which both of them wore, were pushed back over their shoulders, on account of the increasing warmth of the day and because 'twas the easiest fashion of carrying them. The oldest girl was about thirteen years of age, while her companion was two years her junior. Both children had fair hair, the little one's escaping beneath her white coif in wayward, wind-tossed ringlets the colour of corn-silk, while her eyes gleamed from out the soft tangle as blue as the speedwell she carried in her warm little fist. She had a gentle, confiding way about her.

"I' faith, Sue," she said, half smothering a sigh, "I wish I might borrow me yon bird's wings, for I be forewearied and can go no faster than this

snail's pace, and I would be at home with a bowl full o' porridge before me."

"I warrant thee it wouldn't stay full long," the other laughed; "there's naught like being out in the woods for hours to make a person hungry. But see Hamnet now, what a laggard he is! One would think he'd never a thought o' porridge or o' aught else save the sky and his dreamings, and yet, once we're set down, he'll eat more than the two o' us. 'Tis ever thus with men and boys; my Grandam Hathaway saith they have tremendous appetites——"

"Good Mistress Sadler told me 'tis because a man must feed his brains and muscles, and a girl, now, she hath only her body to care for."

"Marry and amen! I be glad Mistress Sadler is no godmother o' mine. Have we not brains as well? I think there is no question o' a boy's brains when there's food set before him. He eats so much for that he's greedier than we are, and that's the truth. Feed his brains, forsooth! Believe no such foolishness, Judith sweet. My father's brains are better than good Master Sadler's, and he hath more o' them too, but he's no such big eater as Master Sadler is. Dost remember last Michaelmas, when father was here and the Sadlers came to dinner? I warrant thee, father ate not so much o' the goose as Hamnet's godfather did, and he'd more excuse, with all his brains to

feed. Nay, nay, that's foolish gossips' talk, though I be but a child—and a girl into the bargain—to say it."

"I care not for my part, Sue, why a boy should eat more, so that I always have enow. I know one thing though; an we were starving now and there was but a crust o' bread between us three, Hamnet would give up his share to us, though his muscles and brains cried out for the feeding."

"Ay, that he would, and though we would protest, yet would he find some good reason to make us do his will. And I marvel why that should be."

"Methinks any man would do the same. Even Master Sadler, though he be overfond o' eating, would give up all for my dear godmother's sake."

"I cannot say. He might do so an Mistress Sadler were in sore need; but every day, I think not—I think not. He'd as lief she had the wing o' the goose, so that he still got the major portion."

"Nay, Susanna, what would our father say?"

"Our father would say—troth! I know not. But methinks, though he might chide me for letting my tongue wag thus, he would smile in that way o' his that robs his words o' any sting, and mayhap he would make a little note in that

great mind o' his o' good Master Sadler's excellence and his mighty fondness for eating and sack, and see how he could turn it into his writings some day."

"Doth he always so? I shall be afeard to speak or sing when he is by."

"There is naught to fear; he looks on only in kindness; he is so gentle for all he is so strong and tall, and knoweth so much. But he is ever learning and everything teacheth him—the birds and the flowers, and the way the trees blow in the wind, and—everything. Why, even you and me are not too small. That is how his brain is fed, in that manner and with reading, and not with stupid goose and gravy, but——"

"There's mother now," Judith interrupted, "and grandam too; they're watching for us. Methinks my Grandmother Shakespeare hath the sweetest face in all the world. I'll race thee to the house, Sue, and beat thee, else thou may'st have my new handkercher, the one set about wi' Coventry blue."

"Keep thy handkercher," a scornful voice exclaimed, near them; "girls don't know how to run."

"Fie! fie!" the sisters cried in a breath, their words unheeded by the slim figure darting past. Judith put out a detaining hand, but she only grasped a bit of branch from the store the boy

carried, and even that would not stay with her; it flew back with a snap, leaving a few, half-opened buds in her fingers. The next moment she started in pursuit of her brother, and Susanna, after a short struggle with her dignity—she was growing tall and had put away many childish things—joined also in the race. The disdainful gibe was like a lash to spur her on, but despite her fleetness she was no match for those flying feet that seemed to spurn all obstacles in the way, though she easily outdistanced Judith. It was a foregone conclusion that the boy should win.

"Give ye good-day," he cried as he reached the two women who had been interested onlookers of the race. "Saw ye ever such beautiful blooms? I knew just where to find them—I've been watching for weeks, and I showed the girls. Oh! we've had rare sport. I warrant ye there was never such a Maying before." He broke off as his sister came panting up, with a little nod of satisfaction.

"Said I not true, Judith?" he asked slyly.

"About what?"

"About running—girls can't run."

"'Twas not a fair race, was it, sweet Mother? He'd a goodish start, and besides he frighted us as he ran by."

"I outran thee once in Shottery Lane," Susanna cried, triumphantly.

"Thou'lt never forget that," Hamnet laughed; "'twas ages agone. Let's try again, fair and square—thou couldst not beat me to-day."

"Nay, I could not do it to-day, forsooth, because—because there are the May sports to see."

"To-morrow, then?"

"To-morrow will be a busy day, will it not, dear Mother? I could beat him to-morrow, were it not that there's baking to do; and then there's father's cloak to unpick, that it may be made over into a doublet for thee, Master Hamnet."

"The next day?"

"The next day Susanna might easily outrun thee, sirrah," interposed the elder Mistress Shakespeare, with a laugh, "were it not that she hath promised to help me with my knitting. One victory will have to content her."

"Ay, that it will," the boy returned, good-humouredly, "for 'tis the only one she'll ever get, as ye all know, though your words be so brave. Harp away, Sue, about that time; I give thee leave. Thou'lt still be talking o' it when thou art old and grey."

"Thou'rt late in coming home; we looked for thee an hour agone."

"We could come no sooner, Mother sweet, there was so much to do and see."

"But the pole hath been up this long while now."

"Ay, in sooth it hath; and who dost think placed the banner at its very top? Nay, then, thou'lt never guess. 'Twas me—me—me! I knew thou wouldst be mazed, and my sweet grandam too; but this is how it happed. It fell this year by lot to Thomas Getley to put the flag in place, and 'tis the third time running that he hath had the office, and he careth not overmuch for the honour, save that 'tis kept from the other men. When we were in the woods this morn and the pole had been fixed fair with ribbons, I heard him talking with his mates and giving himself airs like the London gallants that come sometimes to Clopton House. And, saith he, with a shrug, like this, 'twas not such a fine thing to do as they thought, and for his part he'd as lief any boy would have the chance. Why then, Gran, I walked straight up to him and said I'd take him at his word. At that they all laughed, but I would not budge, though the cries sent little hot pricks into my skin, and he was mightily flustered.

"'Why dost thou want to do this thing?' he asked, speaking out right boldly; 'no boy hath ever set the flag.'

"Then I answered him in few words:

"'And that is why I want to do it.'

"At which he laughed, too, and saith he:

"'Perhaps thou hast another and a better rea-

son to serve thee, sith methinks 'twould never do to overthrow old customs just for a lad's desire.'

"'Ay, that I have,' I cried, 'and the best o' reasons, too. 'Tis the Cross o' Saint George I want to raise, and it meaneth more to me than it can to thee, for my father was born on Saint George's day.'

"Then he peered at me close.

"'Why,' quoth he, 'tis Will Shakespeare's little lad. Nay then, thou shalt have my place, for his sake and thine own. What say ye, friends, shall we not let the old custom slip?'

"And all the men shouted 'Ay!' right lustily, and one o' them set this wreath upon my head. And Mother—Gran—when we were come to Master Ford's field my heart was going as loud as old Pimpernel's tabour, and my hands shook. I was afeard I might not bind the banner safe and there'd be some mishap, and then sore coil for Thomas Getley and the others. But when I stepped out at the sign they made me I wasn't affrighted in the least. I knelt and tied it, knots and double knots—'twill only come down when the pole doth—and then, still kneeling, I bent my head and kissed its folds softly. 'Fly wide, little kiss,' I whispered; 'fly as far as London town; the breeze will bear thee safe to father.'"

"Thou art a pretty phrasemonger, in sooth," his mother interrupted, with a fond laugh, "and

full o' conceits too. 'Tis a good thing, verily, to remember thy father. I doubt not he'll be thinking o' us all this day and wishing he was here."

"'A branch of May I bring to you,
Before your door it stands'"—

sang Judith in her shrill, sweet voice as she danced to and fro with her pretty skipping steps and low courtesies.

The others stopped in their light talk to watch the figure of the little maid darting up and down the soft, green sward. Susanna and her mother stood together at one side. They were very like. The woman had only to glance at the girl's fair face to recall 'the lovely April of her prime,' though the rose was still faintly glowing in her own cheeks, and her fading hair, in the bright sunlight, took on some of its old-time sheen. Hamnet was near his grandmother, as was ever the way when the two were of the same company. By a power stronger than that the magnet wields they were always drawn close to each other. Her arm was thrown fondly about his shoulder, and his head, with its curling auburn hair, was cast back against the spotless kerchief that was folded across her bosom. His frank face, with the dreamy hazel eyes set wide apart, was turned in admiration toward his twin, the soft, delicate cheeks curved into laughing lines.

"Brava! Judith," he cried. "Though I beat thee at running, thou canst give me points in dancing. I can stamp a Trenchmore as good as the next one, but when it comes to such twistings and turnings I cut but a sorry figure. Thou'rt lighter than thistledown, and there'll be no better dancing done this day, I trow. But leave off now, for I be starving. Wait, Mother dear; let me fix that bit o' thorn above the door, to keep the witches out. So!"

"That's a good lad! Now, go you in, children, and get your porridge—'tis set on the dresser. We are losing day; it wastes toward noon, and there's naught done. Leave your grandmother and me to dress the house."

The children ran within doors with merry shouts, and the two women looked at each other smilingly. They needed no speech, for each could read the other's heart as 'twere an open book. Then they fell to work, still in silence, sorting out the long vines and twisting them about the supports of the pent-house. They put great branches of May upon the ledges of the windows and bound them by the door, stepping off at a little distance the better to judge of the effect, as Richard Sponer of Chapel Lane, the painter, studieth his work.

They made a comely picture working together in the fresh spring sunshine. The sweet-faced

elderly woman, with the silvery hair showing beneath the border of her coif, touched the flowers tenderly, as though they were a part of her own youth. She stepped a little slower than did her companion, and her tall, slender figure was somewhat bowed, but she bore herself with a dauntless mien. The other woman was not quite so tall; she moved with quick, brisk motions, and as she wound the blossoms deftly into sweet-smelling nosegays, she sang in a low, vibrant voice the words of little Judith's song:

"'A branch of May I bring to you,
Before your door it stands.'"

CHAPTER III

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not deck'd with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be seen; my crown is call'd Content.

HENRY VI.

Spirits are not finely touch'd
But to fine issues.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE.

WHEN Master William Shakespeare went up to London to seek his fortune he left his wife and their little ones in his father's home in Henley Street. At that time his father and mother, with three of their children — Joan, a merry-eyed lass of sixteen, Richard, and Edmund—the latter a small lad of five years—were living in the old house. Gilbert, the son next in age to William, was away in Snitterfield, at his Uncle Henry's farm, whither Richard followed him a couple of years later.

There was a warm welcome ready for the little family from those good, true hearts, and the passing years only made the ties of affection stronger. It was very pleasant for the elder Mistress Shakespeare to have the continual companionship of her

daughter-in-law, Anne. There was something so lovable about the creature that none could resist her. She had a way of slipping into a body's heart willy-nilly, and taking up her home there. Her low voice and gay laughter were goodly sounds to hear, while her fondness for her children was the touchingest thing in the world. The two women, though they were each a trifle jealous of the other, as is often the case with very worthy women, were drawn closely together by their love for the little ones.

Master John Shakespeare, worried and worn with the sad stress into which his affairs had fallen, had lost much of the jovial cheer which had been so marked a characteristic of his in earlier life. He had grown silent, too—he who had always been so ready with his lively sallies!—and the wish to keep from his fellows was one that increased daily. His was a nature to thrive only in the sunshine; the storms and shadows of life left him sore distressed, hopeless, despairing. He was like a wounded animal seeking the silences to nurse his hurt, and looking thence suspiciously at the world. The turn fortune had taken had embittered him sadly, and he no longer went abroad to mingle in the merrymakings of his towns-people, so that the coming of the children was as if a door had been opened suddenly upon a pleasant place radiant with love and cheer.

It was midsummer when the young family came. Susanna was then a little more than two years old, and the twins a matter of five or six months. From the first the heart of the grandmother, which was always open to children, and indeed to all her kind, warmed especially to the little boy. His resemblance to his father, even at that early age, was very marked, and the woman, as she crooned over the baby in her arms, seemed to be living over the time when her first-born son had lain upon her breast and she had sung the same simple words to him:

"'Lully, lulla by, littell tyné child,
By, by, lullay, lullay by, littlle tyné child,
By, by, lully, lully.'"

Sometimes the bright eyes would close almost at the first line, and then the sweet voice would cease and the grandmother would fall a-dreaming too, only with open eyes, of that other little one who had grown to man's estate and who was far away amid the din and distractions of a strange city. But the same confident smile would linger on her placid lips. She knew the heart of the man; it was as simple and gentle as the child's had been, and she had no fear that he would fall a prey to ill-doing. She had such absolute trust in him, though she missed him sorely and would fain, for her own sake and the sakes of those

about her, wish that he were home again with them all.

At other times, if Baby Hamnet were not minded to sleep, she must needs talk to him in that foolish fashion women have—lopping off their words and twisting them into strange shapes, as if by so doing the small mind can understand a person the easier. Or, if he ought to go to Dreamland, then would she sing that other old song, about that Babe whose mother's heart was filled with grievous dismay in the lowly stable in the far-away Eastern land:

"'Lulla, la lulla, lulla, lulla bye,
My swete littell babe what meanest thou to cry?
Bee still my blessed babe, though cause thou hast to mourne,
Whose blood most innocent the cruel king hath sworne.
And lo! alas, behold! what slaughter he doth make,
Shedding the blood of infants all, swete Saviour for thy sake.
A king is borne they say, which king that king would kill.
Oh! woe and woeful heavie day when wretches have their will.'"

So would Mistress Shakespeare sing the carol to the end, softly and tenderly, and when the little one had gone to Slumberland she would lay him in the cradle by his sister's side and fall to watching the two sleep-flushed faces. And often her daughter-in-law would cry, half in jest, half in earnest:

"Nay then, my Mother, thou'rt all for Hamnet

and hast no eyes for my sweet bird, Judith; and as for Susanna, thou givest the child no word. I do protest, la, 'tis not right; hereafter I will keep the little lad myself and thou mayest sing Judith to sleep."

Then the elder woman would laugh in her turn and say:

"I fear not thy threats, sweetheart, and right willingly will I sing to Judith. In truth I love her and my little Susanna too; only—only—the boy cometh first because o' his father's sake. Thou'lt humour an old woman, lass?"

And for answer Anne Shakespeare would kiss the sweet questioning face, and if Hamnet were awake she would push him crowing into his grandmother's arms and play hy-spy with him over her shoulder, whereat Susanna would join in the sport with her shrill screams and Judith would coo gayly from the cradle. Truly, they were very happy together.

So the months slipped by, and season after season passed uneventfully and quietly to the household in Henley Street. It seemed but yesterday to Mistress Mary Shakespeare that Susanna, on the time of her first coming there, had stood in the door-way, while her father had cut a tiny notch in the wood above her sunny head to mark her height and had put a little 'S' alongside. The mother, Anne, had sat by, looking on

with laughing eyes the while she danced Baby Judith in the air and she herself held Hamnet; and when his father turned to him and said: "Thou'rt too small to be measured, manikin," she had cried out: "Not so, William, not so; he is as high as my heart." Whereat they had all laughed at her quick protest. And now her words had come true in very deed.

The years had brought still other changes to Henley Street. Master John Shakespeare walked a little slower, and the habit of silence had grown more surely upon him, though with his son's increasing success in London his own fortune was rapidly mending. A look of content had gradually settled upon his wrinkled face, dispelling the harassed expression which had so long disfigured it, and he held his head with something of the confidence he had shown in the days of his own public capacity.

The same gentle trust was written on Mistress Mary Shakespeare's features; the same unflinching bravery of mien and cheeriness of word that had never failed her even in the darkest hours were still apparent in her deportment and speech. She was always one to help others; her heart was as guileless and warm as a child's and as ready to go forth in love. It was a heart that knew no age. If there was a little more pride in her bearing than in the old times, was not that

justifiable, when away in London town her son was becoming famous?

Already there had come word of the plays and poems he had made. Had not Richard Field, himself a Stratford man, printed 'Venus and Adonis' and that sadder, graver story of poor Lucrece? Had not all London town talked of them? Had not the young Earl of Southampton been glad to be the friend and patron of such a man of genius as sweet Master William Shakespeare? And he had made substantial proof, ay! that he had, of his friendship and love.

Suppose William were silent about his work? It was always his way to give no praise to himself. But good Master Field let the folk of Stratford know the high esteem in which the poems were held by people of quality and learning. And those plays that crowded the theatre during the season—what magician's hand had called them into being? Was it possible—was it possible—how the mother's heart grew tremulous with delight!—that it was the same hand that, in the long ago, had clung to her gown and had patted her face so lovingly?

What a brave showing the mere titles made! 'Harry the Sixt'—or truly all that was best in it! —'the pleasant, conceited historie of The Taming of a Shrew,' 'Errors,' 'Love's Labour's Lost,' 'The Gentlemen of Verona,' 'Richard the

Third,' 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' 'The Venetian Comedy'—and there were more to come. Why, he said he had just begun, and he loved his work. He was going to write a play about a pair of hapless lovers—he had told her that much already—and he would weave therein a bit of poor Mistress Charlotte Clopton's story—she that had died a fearful death the year of the great plague in Stratford town—God rest her soul! And, after that, there would be more and more. The wonder and the glory of it! Surely a woman had a right to be proud of a son like that; but, deep in her heart, she knew that, beyond all his genius, the real reason of her pride in him was because of his love for her and his tenderness and help to them all. What did they not owe him?

The family in Henley Street had grown smaller with the flight of years. Of the other sons, Edmund was the only one at home—a tall stripling, with his heart already turned Londonward. But Gilbert and Richard, both of them men now and able to go whither they would, were bothered by no such dreams. They were content with the tranquil life of the near-by hamlets, where they followed their simple pursuits and found their diversions in sheep-shearing festivals, wakes, and harvest-tide, the annual fairs at Stratford, the entertainments connected with Christmas, New

Year's, and Easter, the May-day sports, the delights of Whitsuntide, the beating of the bounds during Rogation week, and the occasional representation of stage-plays at the Guildhall of their own native town or in Coventry, only a short distance away. These home-keeping youths had much to amuse them without going far a-field.

Pretty Mistress Joan Shakespeare was no longer an inmate of her father's house; she had exchanged her early home for one of her own in Scholar's Lane, which Master William Hart had provided for his bride. The wedding had occurred the previous August, when the twins were ten years old, and it had been an occasion of great rejoicing. Hamnet and his sisters had rifled the woods and lanes the day before, of flowers and vines, and had helped the young maids deck the rooms of both houses—the old home and the new—with the sweet-smelling treasures; they had run hither and thither on errands, as fleet of foot as the deer in the heart of Arden, and had even penetrated into the kitchen, there to receive frequent rewards for their good behaviour. And on the auspicious day itself, with the bride-favours floating from their shoulders, they had borne themselves right bravely in their different parts.

Susanna and Judith, with the other bridesmaids, had gone early to Master William Hart's house, presenting him with a branch of gilded

rosemary bound with ribbons, and then had led him forth to the church along the rush-strewn, flower-bedecked way, while Hamnet, with the bridegroom's men, had conducted the bride thither, Hamnet walking nearest to her, because she would have it so. In sooth, she made a winsome bride, with the chaplet of flowers on her bright brown hair, which waved to her waist, her fair face looking forth from the filmy veil which became her vastly! In her hand she bore a branch of rosemary that had been previously dipped in sweet-scented water, and her little nephew at her side waved his gilded branch gently to and fro. Just in front of them strode a youth who carried the bride-cup, which was filled with wine and decorated with vines and ribbons, and back of them were the musicians playing ever softly.

So they passed along the road, coming at last to Trinity Church, where the doors stood wide and the wedding-chorus greeted their ears. Good Sir Richard Bifield was waiting at the chancel steps, and thither the bridal party walked up the nave, where the wedding-guests were grouped on either side, the women pressing forward to see the bride as she passed, and all of them waving their sweet-scented branches of gilded rosemary and bay until the air was heavy with perfume.

When they paused and the vicar had stepped

forward, Hamnet, from his place next the groom —for the maidens were standing now with the bride—stole furtive glances about him, and marvelled much why, when it all was so joyous and beautiful, his Grandam Shakespeare should look so sad. His sight was keen enough to discover the tears in her eyes, and he wanted to comfort her, though why she should need comfort at such a time he knew not.

"'Tis because women are not men," the little lad mused, "that they act thus. Methinks they're ever like the sky in April, one moment tears and the next all smiles—sad and happy in a breath. There's my Aunt Joan—'twas only this morning, when my grandam kissed her, that she fell a-weeping, and now how gay she looks, as if she never would shed a tear again. 'Tis passing strange. I must ask father——"

He broke off in his reflections as the singing burst forth again, and the newly wedded couple, after the bride-cup had been called for and the customary kiss given, turned from the altar. Mistress Hart stopped for a moment, on her way down the nave, by her mother, and Hamnet, looking on, saw tears not only in his grandmother's eyes, but in his aunt's also, as the two women embraced each other fondly, and the elder said "God bless thee!" while the younger murmured "Amen."

"'Tis marvellous strange," the boy thought. "Of a truth I must ask father."

But there was no chance then to seek the desired information, with the people pressing out after the bride and sweeping everyone along. That was surely no time to pause and wonder at the ways of women-folk. What a clatter there was! As if the few minutes of enforced silence had but served to oil their tongues the better, and everyone must make up for that bit of quietness. There was more noise abroad than ever came from the new mill-wheel just beyond the church at the foot of Mill Lane. The laughing, chattering guests surged through the open doors and formed into a procession; then they started on the homeward way.

Master and Mistress Hart led the happy company; then came Master John Shakespeare and Mistress Mary, his wife, followed by Master William Shakespeare — come on purpose from London town to be at his sister's wedding— walking with Mistress Anne, his wife, who was clad in a brand-new gown as fine as any Court lady would wish to wear, with the ruff about her throat set and coloured with yellow starch, and upon her head a little cap of silver tissue—a gift from her husband—which did augment the soft fairness of her hair right wondrously, while upon her breast she wore the blue bride-laces which,

with the favours, were always presented to the guests on such occasions.

Back of them trooped the relatives and friends. Old Mistress Hathaway, with her son Tom, the Henry Shakespeares from Snitterfield, the John Shakespeares from Bridge Street, the Shakespeares from Rowington Hall, the Etkyns, Cornells, Webbs, Lamberts, and Greenes; the Cloptons and Combes, graciously friendly, Henry Walker —he that would be alderman some day—hobnobbing with the Master Bailiff, the Vicar of Trinity arm-in-arm with the master of the Grammar School—Sir John Colton—both deep in some learned disputation, and turning ever and anon for support in their argument to Sir Thomas Hunt, of Luddington, who was walking just behind them. Then came Hercules Underhill and his good wife; Walter Roche and his; Julius Shawe, gay and smiling, though everyone knew he was wearing the willow for sweet Mistress Hart's sake; the Rogerses, the Sadlers, and many others, old and young; while the children ran on before, or danced along by the sides of their elders, singing and shouting merrily.

And then, almost before they realized it, they had reached their destination, and right in front of them stood the Shakespeares' home, its windows dressed with flowers, and its garden, which swept from the back around the two sides, green

and sweet beneath the glowing sun. There were birds twittering in the trim hedge along the street and calling out to their brother-songsters in Nicholas Lane's garden to come and see the happy doings.

Fast upon the home-coming followed the bride-ale and the games and dances. There was nothing but jollity—not a thought or a suspicion of a tear! Hamnet and the other children strayed about the house at first; then, wandering off to the adjacent fields, they played at hoodman-blind, tag, and barley-break, their shouts filling the air with a blithe hubbub. He quite forgot his reflections of the earlier day, but they returned in full force when the time for parting came.

There were tears then in plenty; tears in Grandam Shakespeare's eyes, though her lips were curved into brave smiles; tears in his mother's eyes, though why she should weep he could not tell, when only the moment before she had been laughing with her gossip, Mistress Sadler. Tears, tears, tears in the little bride's eyes, so many that they brimmed over and rolled down her cheeks. Grandfather Shakespeare looked as if he had a sorry pose. Hamnet glanced quickly at his father, whose kind, hazel eyes were bent upon the bride's face; they were very soft and tender and—Hamnet could not say.

It was very strange! He could not see overwell himself, and when Aunt Joan stooped and whispered "Good-by, sweet!" he felt a queer lump rise in his throat. He threw his arms around her, and clung to her as she kissed him. Then he watched her, still surrounded by the bridesmaids and bridesmen, go away hand-in-hand with her husband across the fields to the new home, and somehow—he couldn't see very far. And yet it was a clear evening with such a soft, peaceful after-glow flooding the sky, or he had thought so—but now a mist was rising!

He would ask father. He turned with the question on his lips, but his father had gone with some friends to pass the evening at the Swan and would not be back until long after Hamnet's bedtime. The little lad stifled a sigh; there was no use asking the women-folk or grandfather. The house seemed strangely quiet after the gayety, and all the flowers were drooping and dying. The very air was full of sadness, and yet for all that grandmother had looked so sorrowful, she and his mother were talking blithely of the doings of the day, and what this one had worn and what the other, and what had been said. Susanna and Judith were whispering on the settle; he could catch a word now and again—'kirtle,' 'fernstitch,' 'bonelace,' 'my mammet.' How

girls talked, as if a boy ever cared to listen! Now, if Tom Combe and Francis Collyns were only present, there would be something worth hearing. There would be talk of the Armada—one never tired of that desperate sea-fight; or the war in Flanders, look you! or the famous encounter between Sir Guy and Colbrand. And if by any chance those subjects palled, there was that game of prisoners' base the big boys played Saturday sen'night in the field near the Bankcroft. He patted his big hound, Silver.

"Thou understandest anyway," he whispered; "and when father cometh back we'll ask him."

In the soft dawn of the next morning, the whole household was astir. Master William Shakespeare was going to London, and must be away by the sun's uprising. After Susanna and Judith had spread the table and the elders had seated themselves, Hamnet, as was his wont, stood at one side and repeated his grace. That finished, he made a low courtesy, and said "Much good may it do you!" and forthwith put the breakfast upon the table, waiting so carefully and attentively upon his elders that the simple meal of eggs and bread and milk, with crisp lettuce from the garden, was soon over. At its end, after he had carried away the empty platters and brushed the crumbs into a 'voider,' Susanna and

he removed the cloth, folding it carefully, and then they brought a clean towel and a basin and ewer for washing the hands.

With all that to do, there was no chance to ask questions, though the boy could feel them surging within him. There were so many last words to be said by everyone that his fancies must need wait. He stood quietly by, suppressing his disappointment bravely, but his father, with that wonderful way he had of reading another person's thoughts, looked at the wistful little face and understood that something was troubling the small mind. Yet he gave no sign. He kissed them all farewell; then he mounted the roan champing at the door, and, turning in his saddle, he held out his hand.

"Spring up behind me, little lad," he cried; "and, Sir Silver, stretch thy legs; we'll go a bit toward London together."

"An I might only go all the way," Hamnet whispered, as he clung to the strong figure, and the horse bounded forward through the quiet street.

"Would'st leave them all for me?"

Hamnet glanced at the small group under the pent-house; at the old man in his dressing-gown, with his 'broidered night-cap on his straggling, white hair; at the two women side by side, with their sad faces that were yet smiling, oh, so

valiantly; at the little girls waving their hands. He tightened his hold.

"Yea," he answered, with a quick-drawn breath.

"And Silver?"

"He's going, too."

Will Shakespeare laughed.

"Thou hast a ready wit; but wait, my little lad; the years fly quickly. When thou'rt older, thou shalt be with me——"

"All day, and every day?"

"An thou wilt."

"'Tis so long till then; I would the time were now. Methinks the years will be monstrous slow in passing."

"Nay, nay, they will go fast enough, and there is much thou wilt have to do. Thou must grow wise and good, and be merry and gentle withal."

"And what age must I be?"

"I wot not. After the grammar school here, there will be study at Oxford, and then——"

"London and father!"

"Not so fast, not so fast. London an thou wilt, but methinks by that time thy father will be back here in Stratford town in some home of his own. What sayest thou to the 'Great House,' if Fortune smiles? But breathe no word of this; thou'rt like my second self, and so I speak to thee."

Hamnet pressed his arms closer and the man went on, with a smile: "There's no spot like this little town of ours, lad, an thou search the world up and down; nay, not even Italy herself, fair though she be."

"Then we'll stay here together."

"But London?"

"I care not for London, an thou be not there."

The man looked back fondly at the small, eager face against his shoulder.

"Say'st thou so, lad; say'st thou so?" he murmured softly, and his eyes were very tender.

At the Swan a number of travellers, already mounted, were waiting before the door. They greeted the new-comers right cheerily, and after a few minutes spent in idle talk the little cavalcade set out on its journey, clattering down Bridge Street and over the great bridge, and thence into the road which led to Shipston and Oxford, and so winding on to the wonderful metropolis itself. Hamnet still continued with his father, an observant listener of the conversation carried on between his elders.

But all too soon Will Shakespeare dropped behind the others. His horse stepped slowly. There was no danger of falling off, and yet Hamnet clung very close, and the man put his hand over the little, straining fingers that were clasped

above his heart as if he would not let them go. So they rode for a short space in silence.

The sun was up, and from the roadside bushes and the thinning trees there came the sound of gay bird-voices, but neither man nor boy heeded them. Suddenly the horse stopped altogether, and the strong fingers undid the little clinging ones tenderly. The bridle-rein lay on the roan's neck, and the man turned and took the child in his arms, kissing him fondly.

"Thou must go home," he said; "nay then, I like a sunny face. So! that's my own true lad. Cheer the others too, the women-folk and the little maids. That is the charge I give thee."

Hamnet winked back his tears and kissed his father in return, then he jumped to the ground and stood leaning against the quiet horse. Silver came close to his side.

"Do men never weep, Father?" the boy asked, wistfully.

"Not often. We must be brave, and the best way is to be masters of ourselves; and yet 'tis no harm, sweet, when we are parting from those we love. 'Tis nature's due. Only it makes it easier if we—being the stronger ones—keep a smiling face."

"But thou look'st sorry now."

"Ay, and I am sorry."

"And though thine eyes be not wet, belike there's a lump in thy throat as there is in mine."

"Even so, little lad. I must hie me to some wiseman to be rid of it. And thou must do the same. Good Doctor Trust or Cheer—thou'lt know their dwelling. And I'll tell thee a secret, too: the trees and the birds have comfort in their keeping for those who go and those who stay."

"But why doth the choke come in our throats when we do say farewell?"

"'Tis because we love each other, dear heart. And now stand back; I must not linger."

"Thou'lt come again?"

"Again and again and again. God be with thee, little lad."

"God be with thee, sweet Father."

CHAPTER IV

A grandam's name is little less in love
Than is the doting title of a mother.

RICHARD III.

SINCE that August morning almost ten months had gone by. May had been ushered in with all the usual rites and had slipped away into June. The fields round about Stratford were ablaze with gorgeous scarlet poppies amidst the yellowing grain; wild flowers painted the dark-green thickets with vivid splashes of colour, and bits of feathered happiness made the arching trees along the roads and in the orchards bowers of song.

The river, too, between its willow-guarded banks, raised its blithe voice as it crawled slowly by, with never a hint in its laughing murmurs of those fearful times when it had overleaped its bounds and had swept, like some cruel monster, upon the little town, carrying disaster in its train—a trusty friend turned on the sudden into an implacable foe! But in this golden June weather it sang so sweetly among the sedges, it were unkind, surely, to remember its former ill-doing.

Not one of those living in Stratford town but loved to ramble by its side as it wound through the meadows, gleaming with a thousand laughing eyes in the sunlight, or stole away demure and quiet to where the overhanging trees made an almost impenetrable darkness. It was pleasant, too, to wander within sound of its cheery voice to Bishop's Hampton and Charlecote, or to stroll past Trinity and down Mill Lane to the path leading to Luddington, or to cross the little footbridge and roam at will through the lush fields and along the narrow, overhung pathway of Weir Brake. So many places there were to visit throughout the summer days, it were no easy task to make a choice.

But of all the lovely ways leading out of the small town, the way to Shottery was the loveliest, to the thinking of the young Shakespeares and to the heart of their mother. The small hamlet was a short mile from Stratford, and thither the children made constant pilgrimage, traversing the little path that wound across the meadows, now beneath the shade of stately elms through which the sunlight flickered in shifting patterns, like fine cut-work at their feet, now by tangled hedges where the flowers nodded a welcome and the birds sought to detain them with their songs, or again it straggled out into the open with the wide sky all about them.

When Shottery was reached the path was exchanged for the familiar lane, and there before them stood the object of their quest. It was a picturesque little cottage built of wood and plaster, ribbed with massive timbers—crossed and visible all along its front—and covered with a substantial roof of thatch. The wicket hung loosely under the shade of a thorn, and, once inside the gate, a line of stones led through the garden to the house-door. To the children, fond as they were of the house and its inmates, and certain always of a welcome that filled them with a sense of their own importance, it was ever a delight to them to find the door made fast. Mistress Hathaway, waiting eagerly within for a glimpse of the young life which their gay voices had heralded along the lane, never in her impatience went to greet them on its threshold. She knew the pleasure it gave them to pull the wooden latch themselves and have the door open at their touch. Each one in turn, when a tiny child, had learned the secret: 'Pull the string and you'll get in!'

Long before they had reached the stature to grasp the bit of wood which was nailed on the door, some kindly arms had raised them to the coveted height, and one chubby hand had taken hold of the wood proudly while the other had pulled the bobbin. Over and over again the door had responded to that "open sesame," and

on each occasion joyous gurgles of merriment filled the air. They had gradually outgrown such expressions of delight, though the pleasure of seeking and obtaining admittance at the old door still remained. Susanna, now that she was thirteen, liked to pull the bobbin in a grown-up fashion, as a Court lady on a tour of country visits would be minded to do, while Judith, who alternately aped her sister's or her brother's ways, was now a fine dame approaching the door with mincing steps and much smoothing out of her gown and patting of her hands, as if, forsooth, the latter were covered with fair-scented gloves; or she would swagger up like any saucy rogue, and rain some rousing thwacks upon the wooden surface before discovering the string. She made them sound almost as loud as Hamnet's lusty strokes, so that Gillian would murmur, in the buttery:

"Body o' me! an I could catch that boy——"

Shottery was as familiar to the children as the town where they lived with their father's people. They loved the lanes between the mossy banks where the little brooks came rushing and tinkling along, their gleeful voices making the green silences alive with sound. Oh! those wonderful Shottery lanes, with their wealth of blossoms which they could not hide, nor did not wish to hide, from those loving young eyes! The chil-

dren knew well where to find 'the ladies' smocks all silver white,' the primrose with its wrinkled leaves, the 'violets dim,' and 'the daffodils that come before the swallow dares.' They knew, too, where, as soon as the birds had paired, the arum—their mother's favourite—lifted its pointed, black-spotted leaves from the sides of the ditches. She would often seek it with them, and they never tired of hearing her tell how she had sought it in the long ago with their father, and what he had told her concerning its way of growing. And they would fall a-laughing with her at the dismay she had caused her neighbours, who, wise in herb-lore, declared the arum to be poisonous; and when she had borne some away with her, had said she was bewitched, because no ill effects followed.

But dear as the lanes were to Susanna and Judith, they appealed more directly to Hamnet's dreamier nature. He asked no greater pleasure than to roam through them at all seasons, with Silver at his side, peering now into one flower's face, now into another's, searching the tangle of green for some shyer beauties, or, when the season was far advanced, finding some belated blossoms hidden away where they made a second summer for themselves, or, in the whiteness of winter, guessing at the sleeping things locked close in the heart of nature.

The birds, too, were his friends. The robin-redbreast, that haunts the lanes of Shottery, was as safe from harm at his hands as though it were not 'the bird of God,' and the other little brothers of the air had naught to fear at his approach. He listened to their songs and recognized each voice. That was a concert worth hearing! The dunnock, from its home in the hedge, uttered its tender song, now loud, now subdued, and yet exceeding mellow; the 'black-cap' joined in with his deep, rich strain; the 'white-throat' fluttered from his gauzy nest in the sweet-brier bush and balanced upon a spray, his little breast swelling with music; the 'proud-tailor,' from the tangled, weed-choked thicket, where grew the thistles which formed his chief diet, sang his part; and the other lane-birds, the throstle, chaffinch, greenfinch, yellow-hammer, and the modest little wren, each had its note to add. From the copses came the sound of the nickle, tap-tap-tapping at the trees, and the mournful cries of the queecer.

Much of his knowledge of birds, Hamnet had derived from his father when together they roamed about the country, the tall man making stories for the gladly listening ears of the little lad at his side. It was an additional zest to the child to study the ways of his feathered friends, that he might thus be enabled to tell his father

on each recurring visit. He could imitate their notes with an exactness that was well-nigh marvellous, and he would often answer the different calls as if the greetings were intended alone for him.

It so befell that that June, in the year 1596, Anne Shakespeare and her children were staying a few days at Shottery, much to the satisfaction of good Mistress Hathaway, who was apt to grow lonely and a trifle peevish at times. If she could have had her will she would have kept the little ones with her always—a proceeding to which the grandmother in town would not hearken for an instant.

"La, Anne," Mistress Hathaway said, as she and her daughter sat together at the close of day, "I see no reason why thou and the children should not tarry here till Michaelmas. Mistress Shakespeare hath her good man for company, though ill-fortune hath soured him sorely—an honest soul as thou'dst find on a summer's day, and a kind, but thriftless—thriftless, and over fond o' show! Marry! 'tis a grievous world to see. He had ever a pretty turn to's wit, and well I remember the praise he gave me for my cowslip wine. 'Twould have painted my cheeks tarnation had I not known that no better was ever brewed in all Warwickshire. Od's pitikins! that he should have fallen on such evil times—a man

with so ready a tongue in 's head, and such an incrimination o' good things. But alack! alack! time hath changes for us all, and he's grown the silentest man in the varsal world."

"I' faith, not so, good Mother. He goeth not much abroad, as once he did, but for long there was the fear o' the ill his creditors would work him, and now that that fear's ta'en away, he hath fallen into the habit o' staying at home."

"Ay! and into the habit o' being mum, I promise thee. That's what overmuch staying by one's hearth breeds—silence—silence. The tongue rusts from lack o' use! An the stream be dry by the mill, then 'tis vain carrying grist thither. The last time I met John Shakespeare he'd but a word to say: 'Give ye good-morrow, good Mistress Hathaway.' That was suffigance, and so he passed on. Soul o' me! I wot well the rencounters we were wont to have when he'd chat and chat, so 'twould be hard to put in even a 'hem,' and always some mention o' the cowslip wine before he went. And now, I might never have made 'the best in Warwickshire'—'twas his very phrase—ay! and still do; there's no divergence, save it be in the bettering—for all that some folks remember."

"He hath not forgot, good Mother. 'Twas only yestreen, when I told him we were coming hither for a little stay, that he said, smacking his lips:

'There be many changes, but I remember an 'twere yesterday the very first time I tasted Mistress Hathaway's cowslip wine. She's a famous housekeeper,' quoth he, 'and no one can make you a finer warden-pie come shearing-time.'"

"Tut! tut! and that before his own good wife, too."

"Oh! my Mother Shakespeare was not by; she had gone a walk with Hamnet."

"Hm! But very like he hath said it in her hearing oft. Dost think he hath? Men have no concernment! I would not have the creature's feelings hurt, and yet Mistress Shakespeare's pies are too pale—she's chary wi' the saffron. Methinks the taste o' mine is vastly inferior; but go to—when thou goest back to Stratford I'll give thee a bottle o' wine for Master Shakespeare; he was ever a man o' most unwarrantable taste."

The two women were sitting side by side on an oaken bench in the arbour. It was a favourite place with Anne, for here, years before, she and her young lover used to meet. A walk, shut in by tall box, led round the garden to the arbour, which was also formed of box and was screened from view by a high hedge. 'Twas a quiet spot to rest in, with one's work and one's thoughts of those happy, happy days, while just without the flowers nodded in the sun and made the air sweet with their perfume. Anne drew her needle in

and out of the fine fabric which she was embroidering with Coventry blue, a little smile dancing in her lowered eyes. Her mother leaned forward curiously and took up an end of the linen between her thumb and forefinger.

"What gear is this?" she asked, after a moment.

"'Tis a shirt for Hamnet, my Mother."

"Hamnet—Hamnet—Hamnet," grumbled the old woman; "I do detest, you be all stark mad about the lad. The other day when I saw Mistress Shakespeare she was knitting a pair o' stockings o' finest yarn, wi' quirks and clocks about the ankles fit for a lord. 'Who be these for?' quoth I. 'For my dear Hamnet,' quoth she. And at that I was exceeding wroth. I'd a pair in my poke that I'd knit speciously for the lad out o' good Warwickshire wool, spun by these very hands, and all my work had gone for naught. My cake was dough! What! an thou lettest the lad go tricked in such fashion he'll have no care for plainer things, and that's the certain o' it! I'll not have my gift scorned, and so I'll e'en purvey it elsewhere."

"Not so, sweet Mother; the stockings must be for Hamnet, as thou first intended, and right glad will he be to have them. The ones his Grandam Shakespeare is making are for his Sunday best."

"I trow so. La, mine are but every-day affairs; he'll not use them overmuch."

"In sooth he will, six times as much as the others, when thou remember'st there are six common days to the one Sunday. Thou'lt give them him; there's a good grandam! But think not I favour him more than the little wenches. I'm e'en making them smocks set about wi' cut-work."

"Vanity! Vanity! A touch o' broidery on a boy's shirt comes not amiss, but a maid's head is soon turned with such gawds. Where didst get this stuff? 'Tis most marvellous fine; the greatest thread therein is not so big as the smallest hair. Was it from London?"

"Nay, then, I got it May-day from the pedler who had it in 's pack. He said it came from France, from a place called Cambrai—a heathenish place, marry, where they speak no English. But be the folks heathen or no heathen, they make right pleasing stuff. 'Tis mightily favoured at the Court; the Queen herself hath her ruffs made therefrom."

"An thou copiest the Queen and her wardrobe thy husband will be sore put to getting money for thy extravagances. 'Tis out o' all whooping that a daughter o' mine should flitter her substance like this. Thou'lt be wearing all crimson next! But town ways are town ways, and every gossip must go better pranked than her neighbour. 'Twould never have happed, I warrant

me, an thou hadst lived the year round at Shottery. Here thou couldst save thy angels; here there be no folderols."

"La, an thou chid'st me so, I'll e'en give the partlet I've made thee o' this same cambric to my dear Mother Shakespeare; 'twill become her won——"

"A partlet, say'st thou? Now blessings on thy heart for it! Hast brought it wi' thee? Nay, nay, I detest, I spoke but in mirth."

"Ay, good Mother, the partlet is in my chamber, but 'tis not finished. Susanna hath besought me to let her make it brave with broidery."

"She'll not spoil it, will she? 'Twere a pity, and it such fine stuff and not its like in Shottery village. I'll be in tirrits and frights till it be done. Prythee now, say thou wilt do the finishing thyself, dear wench. The child is over young to be trusted wi' such work."

"Fear not, my Mother; I'd trust Sue to make a forepart for the Queen. There's not a lass anywhere that is handier with her needle. She can do you fernstitch——"

"And Spanish, rosemary, and queen — that's four—besides cross-stitch, chain, and newback," cried a laughing voice.

"Out upon thee, thou young baggage!" Mistress Hathaway exclaimed, turning with a start, to be confronted by Susanna's dimpling cheeks.

"Out upon thee! We've an adage here about listeners."

"It came not true then, for I heard naught but good, as how should it be else when my sweet mother speaks o' me—ay, and my grandam too?"

"Forget it all—forget it all! 'Praise to the face is open disgrace.'"

"'Tis passing strange," sighed little Judith, as she nestled against her grandmother, "that praise should be so sweet! I can always do thrice as well when someone cries 'How nice!' And when I go abroad it maketh the day sunnier if my good mother kisseth me and saith I'm her own dear mouse, and 'there's not a prettier little lass in Warwickshire.'"

"Tilly vally! Is this thine upbringing? Pretty quotha! What's pretty? Thou shouldst not know the insignificance o' the word. I marvel, Anne, thou art so fond! The child is over young for such thoughts—she should not be told—'tis all too soon a maid findeth her way to the looking-glass."

"Is't that we be born so, Grandam? Verily, no one hath told me what pretty means. My Grandmother Shakespeare and my dear mother are pretty, and Susanna, too, and methinks thou'rt pretty an that thy lips be smiling as even now. But Gillian is not pretty, and 'tis better to say that softly, that she may not hear. She's

very ugly to look upon, and yet she maketh such brave, brave marchpane. And so I tell her—there's no harm in that, is there, Grandam? It pleaseth her so."

"No harm at all. Marry, thou'rt a wise counsellor and a pretty one. A little injudicious praise is good sometimes; but I pray Gillian's head be not turned; she needeth watching—she needeth watching. She is slow o' reprehension, too, and thou'dst never believe how long I was teaching her to make that same marchpane. By night and day still was I at it, and e'en now must I caution her that she putteth not in too much sugar. The wench leadeth me a very frampold life. Well-a-day! we must bear what God willeth and never repine, though it giveth us sore heartache. But go to, I must show thee how to make some kickshaws. Woul't like to learn?"

"So much, so very much. When shall it be? Now?"

"Nay, not now, for 'tis nigh trencher-time. Thou'lt get naught but frumenty this even."

"I like thy frumenty."

"And mayhap a spoonful o' custard. I'll give thee destructions in the morning."

"I shall not sleep with the thinking o' it; and Susanna must help. Wilt thou, sweet Sue? And Madam mother must not know until it be done. Shall it be——"

There was a long whisper in Mistress Hathaway's ear, followed by a peal of laughter.

"Susanna doth know already how to make so many things," Judith went on, nodding over at her sister.

"Ay, Susanna is a good housewife," her mother said, smiling fondly, "as thou wilt be, my little mouse, when thou hast left Dame Perrot's charge."

"And how much longer doth the schooling last?"

"Only this summer, sweet Grandmother. I be eleven now, and too old for school. Already I can do divers goodly stitches; not so many as Sue, for she knoweth more than she said just now; and not so smooth, but that will come, they say. I've made a gown, too, for my mammet, though that was not done in school. There I work my sampler, and good Mistress Perrot praised it before all the others. And I can read a little, though I must e'en go slow over the bigger words, and write—hm! not overwell. Mistress Perrot doth oft chide me because I roll my tongue about when I make the letters, but 'tis the greatest help in this varsal world."

"The greatest help! pow-wow! Who ever heard o' such a thing? What say'st thou, Sue?"

The older girl was seated on the arbour-step,

with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting in the hollow formed by her hands. She looked up, as her grandmother addressed her, with a little frown upon her brow.

"Why, I tell Jude 'tis arrant nonsense, but she will still be talking. I mind her no more than summer flies; there need be no such pother about writing—'tis easy enow. But, Grandam, I think it is not just that girls should learn so little. I'd like to go to school longer and read books and books. I want to learn the tongues as Hamnet doth——"

"Tut! tut! one tongue is enow for a woman; it serveth her better than a man's doth any day, wi' all his requirements. The parson doth ever chide us for overmuch talking. Thou'rt wrong, Susanna, to want more learning. Learning is a parlous thing for one o' thy sex. Go to! thou canst read a little and write a little, and that's more, i' faith, than I can do, and I haven't found the world a hard place to get on in these three score years and ten. 'Tis right for men to be candle-wasters, an they have the wit; but, hark 'ee now, who'd look after the puddings and the meats, an the women aped their masters? Let the girls keep away from books and learn to bake and brew and sew, say I; schooling is not for them."

"Nay, then, Grandam, I see not why I should

not study the same as boys do. 'Twould be wondrous pleasant, methinks, to be able to read the books that are printed in London town. The Queen now is very learned."

"The Queen is—the Queen!"

"The Queen is just a woman, after all!"

"Peace, peace, thou speaketh treason. She is the Lord's anointed."

"In truth, I would not be unmannerly to thee, Grandam, but she is a mere woman—a plain woman, my father saith."

"Thy father's tongue will bring him into mischief and to the Tower, an he be not careful. Many have been clapped there for less than that! Speak not so loud, I do beseech thee. Here's Gillian come to reform us 'tis supper-time. I pray she heard thee not! 'twould be all over Shottery, an she had—she is a very tattling wench. I mislike her smile; 'tis too wise, by far. Come, come, let's go in. Pray God she heard thee not! Where's Hamnet?"

"We left him playing at cherry-pits, but he was going to help Thomas fold the sheep."

"Then he's at the house before us," Mistress Shakespeare interposed with a laugh, "for I hear Thomas singing 'I mun be married o' Sunday!' Mercy on us! how long he hath sung that tune. When I had fewer years than thou, Judith, lass, I mind me hearing him drawl it out in just the same

fashion at harvest-time; ay, and indeed all through the years:

'I mun—I mun be married o' Sunday.'"

"And was he married on that day?"

"Not so, duck; he's still a bachelor. Great talkers are little doers, saith the proverb. Marry, that's a true word."

CHAPTER V

Welcome hither
As is the spring to the earth.

A WINTER'S TALE.

O, this boy
Lends mettle to us all!

HENRY IV. (Part I.)

"ART all alone, good Grandam?"

"Yea, dear lad, all alone. Thy grandfather hath gone to Snitterfield to see Uncle Henry, and I have been by myself since early morn. But come hither, come hither; thou'rt welcome, and Silver too."

"And hast thou missed us much?" the boy asked, as he leaned over Mistress Shakespeare's chair to kiss her.

"What, Master Vanity, dost think I've been sighing here all this while for a glimpse o' thy bright eyes? I've other things to do."

"La! Silver and I know better," Hamnet cried, triumphantly. "I'll warrant me thou hast looked up the road and down the road a score o' times this day to see us coming. And now thou art so glad, eyes and mouth laugh for very joy."

"Go to, for a mass o' conceit! As if thy coming meant so much to me! Why—why—thou art a very wizard, then, and canst read a body's thoughts."

She put her arm about him and drew him close, stroking his bright hair and glowing cheeks fondly.

"Methought thou wouldst never come," she said, with a little catch in her voice. "A score o' times, didst say? Marry, I kept no count, though methinks 'twas liker an hundred. Up and down—up and down—I could not stay at my work, and every tiny speck in the distance methought was thee. 'And this time surely,' I would say; but the speck would come nearer and nearer and be some neighbour, or mayhap a stranger, or a child. 'O' Thursday he promised to be here,' I told myself, 'and this is Thursday—and—and——'"

"Thou hadst me drowned in Avon, or seized by a sixpenny-striker, or lured away by the fairies, I wis!"

"Never mind what I thought so that thou art here at last. But art borrowing manners from the Court? Art going to leave a fond lady to sigh for thee, so that she will love thee the better for her longing? Thou'lt never be a promise-breaker, I trow, with those honest eyes."

"Never, Gran, never. I would have come faster, but there were these flowers to gather for

thee; and then I met good Sir Richard i' the woods, and I needs must stop and talk with him."

"And what said he?"

"Nay then, I must borrow me that giant's mouth father told us of to tell you all. But chiefest was this: he hath some new books come from London town, and I may go to look at them and read them, an I list, any time I may come, and Silver too; he likes to have us by."

"Ay, I warrant me he doth, and so do other people. But how didst leave thy other grandam, good Mistress Hathaway, and how be the rest?"

"Why, well, passing well. Judith would have come with me this day, but my grandmother is e'en showing her how to make a gooseberry tart —she will make it with the lattice-work, like the meat-pies at Christmas—and Susanna stayeth to help her."

"And thy mother?"

"My mother sitteth in the arbour and singeth at her stitchery. 'Tis very pleasant there."

"Paint me a picture o' it all."

The boy knelt down at the woman's side and threw his arm across her lap, looking up into her face with a laugh. Silver lay at a little distance, his head resting between his paws, his large, sad eyes fixed upon his master. The casement was open and a climbing rose turned from the sunshine without to peer curiously in at the pretty

scene. It was very cool and pleasant in the low room. The vine at the window cast a graceful, flickering pattern of dark, nodding leaves upon the stone flagging, which had been freshly scoured only that morn and then finished off with a washing of milk. The pattern was prettier by far than the simple border of chalk which ran round the floor. There was no fire in the wide fireplace, though it was laid ready for lighting, and the kettle hung by its long chain from the guy-pole in the chimney, its cheery, sputtering voice silent for the once. At one side was an oaken dresser, where the pewter mugs and platters with some treen trenchers and bowls stood a-row. There was little other furniture in the room—a long settle, whose wooden hardness was concealed by a cushion stuffed with rags; several joint stools; a chair or two, and a table of the plainest construction, with the flap let down. In one corner stood Mistress Shakespeare's spinning-wheel, and on the window ledge near the small willow cage, wherein a bird chirped contentedly, was a low basket containing balls of different coloured crewels.

The walls were freshly whitened, and on them hung some samplers—the work of Mistress Mary Shakespeare and her favourite sisters, Alys and Joyce—dimmed by the touch of the passing years. One a trifle less faded—the first that had been

wrought by Joan Shakespeare—was placed by the side of a half-completed one which little Anne had never had the time to finish, and just below them, glowing with bright, fresh colours, like a bit out of their own young lives, were the latest examples of the skill of Susanna and Judith. The walls, besides, were adorned with 'painted cloths' illustrating the story of Joseph's rise to power and the Seven Ages of Man—these latter a portion of Mary Arden's dowry. There were maxims, too: 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be,' 'Do no man any wrong,' 'Be good unto the poor.' Hamnet scarcely ever regarded these now, though there was a time when he had delighted to read them again and again.

The little street without was sweet with the perfume of the flowers in the garden and the scent of hay from the fields. There were mowers at work in a near-by meadow among the clovers. 'Twas very still save for the singing of the birds in the orchard-trees, the hum of bees among the straw-bound hives by the garden-wall, and the occasional burst of song or laughter from the men pausing at their task.

Mistress Shakespeare looked at the merry upturned face.

"Nay, laggard, begin, begin," she said, fondly.

"Shall I so? Then first—but thou know'st the place as well as I, 'tis only to keep me talking—

there is the little path that leadeth through the garden, past the well, where the water is the coldest o' any in Warwickshire, I trow, and oh, Gran, the garden is pranked fair with growing flowers—roses and the maiden's-blush and woodbine, columbine, the crown imperial, lad's-love, and lilies o' all kind, and rosemary—here's some for thee; 'tis for remembrance, so keep it close. Then cometh the apple orchard, all filled with knolls and hollows, and it goeth up the hill a little ways; then next is the cottage garden, where the melons are ripening and the apricots along the sunny wall are almost ready for picking. And beyond that is the other orchard—oh, thou know'st how the tiny path goeth like a bit o' yellow inkle between the box-hedges and amongst the long grasses. There are many goodly herbs on all sides: rosemary again and celandine—how blue it is! 'tis like the sky, methinks, at mid-day—and fennel and mint, and herb o' grace. There's a bank o' thyme, too, and dew-berries, Gran, the dew-berries so monstrous big—they be better there than anywhere."

"Methinks there are as fine dew-berries to be found here in Stratford and out Wilmcote way; but I know how it is with thee, there's no place so brave as Shottery garden."

Hamnet laughed exultantly.

"And my Grandmother Hathaway chideth me

for thinking the Henley Street garden the best. She is ever plaguing me to say which one I hold the liefest, and when I put her off and say 'I cannot tell,' she frowneth and saith that is no answer; but she is only in jest, for she laughs the next minute."

"And which dost love the best?"

"Nay, thou'rt like my Grandam Hathaway, and—I cannot tell—I love them both."

"But where wouldst rather be—here in Stratford, or over in Shottery?"

"Now Gran, sweet Gran—'twas only last night my other grandmother asked that very question, only she said she knew—she's wiser than thou art."

"And what said she?"

"She said she knew I would liefer be here with thee."

"And then, what didst thou say—thou wert not unmannerly?"

"I' faith, not I, when she was so good as to bake me a whole batch o' little seed-cakes; she would not let Gillian so much as touch one—she made them all with her own hands, and brought them to me."

"But what saidst thou?"

"'Give thee good thanks, sweet Mistress Hathaway.'"

"Nay, I meant not that. How didst answer her question?"

"I told her I loved her cakes."

"Mistress Hathaway was ever skilled for her cookery; but stir thyself, and there on the dresser thou'lt find what thou wilt find. 'Tis beneath that napkin there."

Hamnet came back to his place a moment later bearing a bowl filled with pepper-gingerbread cut out in fantastic shapes. Silver sat up on his haunches, a sudden interest dawning in his melancholy eyes, as if, after all, life were worth the living; he licked his chops with a quivering, expectant tongue, and the next instant his jaws closed over a toothsome morsel.

"'Tis good, isn't it, Silver?" Hamnet mumbled, with his own mouth full. He deposited the dish on the floor and sat down again by his grandmother's knee, reaching up the prettiest device to her. He drew it back and inspected it closely. 'Twas a little fat bulging heart, with two letters intertwined on one side. Mistress Shakespeare regarded him with shining eyes.

"'Tis an 'H,'" the boy said, following the lines with his finger, "and this other is an 'S.' And what may they stand for, good Grandam—Hamnet Shakespeare? Or, as 'tis my heart, they may mean 'His Shottery' or 'His Stratford'—which?"

"Methinks, sirrah, thou didst offer that cake to me, and, as 'tis mine, I read the letters with a difference. The 'S' cometh first."

"The 'S' cometh first? Oh, ho! What an the schoolmaster were by to hear thy criss-cross row?"

"They signify 'Sweet Heart.' Here, give it me, and now take it from my hands, and, an thou wilt have the letters come in their rightful order, let the reading be 'Her Sweet-heart!' How doth it taste? Is it as good as the seed-cake? I do remember me what excellent seed-cakes thy Grandam Hathaway maketh. And were they brown and crisp?"

"When I did eat them methought they were the best cakes that e'er I tasted," Hamnet declared, in a muffled tone; then he added, as her face fell, "and, now, methinks these are the best."

"'Tis like thy feeling for Shottery—when thou art there 'tis thy favourite place, and when thou comest to live i' Stratford this is thy favourite. Verily, thou hast a man's heart in a boy's body, I trow. It taketh on many images, and the last is always the best."

"Nay, not so, Grandam. Here, Silver, old fellow, catch! I love Shottery with one part o' me, and that for many reasons. *Imprimis:* because 'tis where I was born, and where my dear mother was born. *Secundis:* because 'tis so beautiful. I love all the country about the village; there are so many birds in the hedges, and the flowers are so fair—they are the children and the grandchildren

o' the flowers my sweet father loved, when he used to wander through those self-same fields. Sure, never did birds sing sweeter than in the Shottery lanes, and he, away in London town, can hear them singing still—he hath told me so himself. *Tertias*——"

"Thy talk soundeth like the sermon which they say the preacher gave from the Market Cross o' Sunday."

"And I meant it to, but an thou bring'st me out, I must serve thee as he did Goodman Barneshurste. Hast heard o' that? No? Ha, ha! I'm glad to be the first to tell it thee, and thou must tell it to my grandfather when he cometh home. Thomas Whittington was there, and he told us the tale—how that Sir Preacher was slow o' speech, and monstrous dull, so that the people were fair nodding with sleep. And he paid no heed to the hour-glass by 's side, but went on wi' his firstly, and his secondly, and his thirdly, and never a word that the people could take home to themselves. So that at last a voice called out: 'Give us the mate—give us the mate!' At which Sir Preacher leaned him forward and fixed Diccon Barneshurste with a mighty frown, like this, and, quoth he, in a voice o' thunder: 'I'll gi'e ye the mate, I warrant, but I'll tend to the carving myself.' Nay, then, those were his very words. So thou must e'en let me take my own way in tell-

ing my story, Gran, and hearken to my thirdly, 'tis most important."

He sank his voice to a whisper.

"I'm sure and Judith is sure and so is Susanna that the fairies come nights to the upper orchard; we have seen the rings on the grass there—the marks their little feet make as they trip it in a circle. Bend thine ear down close, for they can't abear a tell-tale: we found a mushroom table, and, as true as true, there was a tiny, tiny crumb a-top—it might have been from a rainbow-tart!—and on the ground there was an acorn—and there's never an oak-tree in the whole o' the orchard, so how came it there? 'Tis the fairies' drinking-cup, thou knowest. And Gillian tells us tales o' Robin Goodfellow and the mad pranks he's played in Shottery. She always sets some white bread and a bowl o' milk for him i' the buttery, so that when he cometh at midnight to sweep the house and grind the mustard he will find something for his pains. If she should forget to set them forth, now, or idle about her work he'd pinch her black and blue. And Grandam Hathaway hath many stories about the fairies and how they live, and sometimes how they help people, and then again how they harm the travellers, showing false lights at night and laughing ho-ho-ho! when they go astray in the bogs. I love—love—Shottery for a thousand reasons besides, and I love Stratford

too. I love the river and the bridge and the streets o' the town, yea the very streets, and the Guild chapel—I wish they held the school there now, I liked to look at the wondrous pictures on the ceiling when I went up to say my lessons. And I love Trinity, too, and the pleached alley, and the dear rooks that are so good o' Sundays. Then I love the people here—Sir John Colton, h'm! not overmuch; his ferula hurteth and his great brows are so shaggy; but I like him when I know my lessons."

"And that is often, I hope, lad, else wilt thy father be sore vexed."

"'Tis pretty often, Gran. I do study generally, but in summer when the meadows are so sweet 'tis pleasanter to lie wi' Silver and watch the clouds sail by in the sky and dream and dream, or to play at lastibat or prisoners' base in the school-field, or 'Hide Fox and all after' in the Weir Brake."

"Marry, sweetheart, I know 'tis pleasanter, but an thou wilt be a scholar thou'dst best be getting thy lessons *memoriter*. Romping and dreaming never helped any lad through the Fables! Thou must e'en study first."

"All these I love and more besides," the boy went on, not heeding her counsel, save with a merry twinkle in his eyes to show that he had heard her: "the Sadlers, and the Harts—dear

Aunt Joan and my Uncle William—and then my grandfather and my uncles, too, though Ned need put on no such airs even if he is going to London soon, he's not so much my elder!—and—and—someone else"—he reached up and touched her cheek softly—"and this dear house. In truth I love Stratford best, for 'twas here my own sweet father was born. Tell me about him, Gran, dear."

"Thou'rt very like him."

"Mother saith so, and my Grandam Hathaway thinks I favour him mightily. How glad I am! I'd rather be like him than anyone else in the varsal world."

"He hath ever been a good son and the light o' my eyes when the way was dark and bitter. 'Fore God, I'm proud o' his wit and fancy, but I'm proudest o' the true heart that hath helped us in all our troubles and the kindly words he hath ever given. Only grow up like him, Hamnet, wise an it be God's will, but sunny and gentle and honest."

"My father saith he learned all that from thee."

"Hush thee, now! thy father hath grown a sad flatterer sith he hath met those London gallants, though he had ever a winning tongue."

"Tell me about him—begin, 'tis thy turn now to do the talking. Come, 'twas on Saint George's day——"

"Thou'rt like the prompter at the stage-play, sweeting; thou canst tell the tale thyself, from start to finish. But there! I'll humour thee. Art comfortable?"

Hamnet stretched himself at full length at his grandmother's feet, resting on one elbow and facing her, while Silver came close and curled against his master's breast.

CHAPTER VI

For since the birth of Cain, the first male child,
To him that did but yesterday suspire,
There was not such a gracious creature born.

KING JOHN.

I have liv'd
To see inherited my very wishes
And the building of my fancy.

CORIOLANUS.

"'TWAS on Saint George's day, then, two and thirty years agone, that thy dear father first saw the light," the gentle voice began, "and three days later, as is the custom here, he was christened at Trinity. 'Twas as pretty a morn as thou could'st wish to see, and summer-like too, for the spring had come early that year. The fields on both sides o' the river were soft and green, and there were blossoms peeping up everywhere. The trees had most o' them put forth their bravery, and the birds sang right cheerily amid the young leaves. I was singing too in my heart for joy o' all the beauty in the world as I glanced ever and anon from my open casement. I was above-stairs with

the little one donning his finery, and my sister, thy grand-aunt, Joyce, was e'en helping o' me. She had made a mantle for him, fair with fringe and broidery—a bearing-cloth fit for a squire's child—and when the time came for them to go, she wrapped it about his head and tiny shoulders and it became him wondrously. Then she took him in her arms and bore him gently, but first she needs must go up the stairs a little way, as is always meet with a new-born child. And what think'st thou she did? 'Why,' quoth she, looking back at me with mischief in her eyes, 'an a few steps up will bring him luck, I'll not mind the trouble o' going the whole flight for his dear sake, for from my heart I wish him all honour and advancement.' So with a laugh she went up the stairs to the very top, and then, turning, she came down again, smiling softly to herself. And she brought him to my bedside for a farewell kiss, and, saith she, when that she showed me his little, peaceful face: 'No matter how high he climbeth, sweet sister mine, his love will always bring him back to thee.' Those were her very words! Peradventure there be some that would say 'twas only a merry maid's fancy that caused their utterance, but I know better. I tell thee, lad, those words so lightly spoken fell deep into my heart, and many's the time I've thought on them in these later years, and I know, i' faith, 'twas no

whimsey on her part, but 'twas an angel bade her speak them.

"Then she left me and went down to where thy grandfather was waiting, here in this very room, with our friends and kinsfolk, and they, with one accord, gathered about her to see the babe, some cautious-like and others pushing and crowding; but, marry, the manikin knew not fear. He just looked at them all with something like a smile in 's eyes, as though he wist well what their brave sallies meant. And after they had gazed their fill they formed into a little band and went through the door, and I, watching from my window above, saw them troop out into the sunshine and wend their way down the lane. Soon they passed from my sight, but I could still follow them with my mind's eye, faring along by the Market Cross, on and on to Old Town; friends and relatives led the way, and then came my sister Alys carrying the chrisom, made o' fine-wrought linen, white as driven snow. Oh! 'twas a goodly company, but fairest o' them all was the child in Joyce's arms, and full well she knew that too, for she stepped as proud as proud, walking between his father and good Master William Clopton, who would e'en stand sponsor to my little son."

"And he it was that gave him six Apostle spoons and the gilt bowl yonder; thou must not leave them out, Gran."

"Nay, not I, though I heeded them not at the time, I trow; I'd only eyes and thoughts for the babe. Well, they all went along gay and merry —I could almost hear their laughter—until they reached the pleached alley that leadeth to the church door; then their light talk ceased. The trees above their heads were fair with buds amid the bursting leaves, and here and there a white petal floated down, but they passed beneath them silently. Twice before had they been along that same path with a little child o' mine, and they needs must think o' those times. And to me waiting in my chamber, there came a thought that shadowed the brightness o' that bright day —a thought o' those other little ones whose loss had left my home so desolate, and my heart was heavy with the remembrance, for a mother always remembers!

"But they tarried not; they went on to the church, uttering no word, though mayhap many a prayer was whispered by them for the boy on my sister's breast, as they halted in the porch to let him enter first. In that way the christening party passed up the nave to where Sir John Breechgirdle stood waiting at the font. Thou would'st not think but the little one was not affrighted in the least by the strange face and the deep, gruff voice; nay, he let fall no whimper. And at that Joyce felt her heart misgive her, as

I did mine when that she told me, for thou knowest they say 'tis always a good sign an a child crieth lustily at such times. But when she would have been dismayed a bar o' golden light came in through the window and touched his face, and the glory o' it stilled her fears. When 'twas all over, Sir John shook thy grandfather by the hand, and said the babe was a likely one and he hoped 'twould thrive, whereat thy grandfather thanked him for 's kind office and bade him to the gossips' feast, and then they all came back to the house and had a cup o' merry-go-down and some o' the christening cake and a store o' all things fine."

She broke off in her recital and looked down at the eager, upturned face.

"All this thou know'st, little lad."

"Ay, marry, that do I; but go on, come to the Plague."

"Hark to him now! The Plague, say'st thou? Ah, those were bitter days that followed; pray God they come not again! The land was pleasant to see, but a grievous ill lay over Stratford town, and the green and gold fairness was but a mockery to the anxious hearts. 'Twas a summer o' smoke, as we knew it would be when the ash budded before the oak, and a great pestilence was all around. Scarce a house was there that was not held in its deadly grasp and bore not the red

cross upon its door above the words: 'Lord have mercy upon us!' writ in a trembling hand. 'Lord have mercy upon us!' How many times I said that over as I hugged my little babe close to my breast! and my heart grew faint at the thought that no matter howsoever tight I held him I could not keep him an 'twas not the Lord's will. All day long I stayed within doors—I dared not stir abroad—with the little fellow in my arms. I couldn't bear to have him from me a minute, and every hour he grew dearer and dearer, and every hour the fear o' losing him pressed closer. The air was heavy with sobs, and the passing bell rang slow and solemn, each peal quivering on my heart-strings. Sometimes the little babe would stop his crowing and seem to listen to the fearsome sound. Then would I fall to kissing him and crying: 'Thou'lt not go, sweet—thou'lt stay with mother?' And he would look at me e'en a'most as though he understood, and once he threw his tiny arm up on my neck as if he would not leave me.

"Nay, nay, lad, that lack o' trust was grievous wrong, I ween, and yet I could not help it. Twice had my arms been lightened o' their load and my heart sore burdened, and I could not let this man-child go. But God was good. He did not chasten me. Sure, there was some charm laid upon our threshold, for the Plague came not nigh us.

The summer waned and still all Stratford suffered, and 'Lord have mercy upon us!' was evermore the cry. The bell tolled by night and day, until its very voice grew hoarse with grief, but there came no harm to the little one that lay upon my heart. He grew apace, the finest, lustiest child I ever saw, with eyes like stars that even then took note o' all around. The woods about here turned to red and gold and still the Plague lingered and the people were wasted with despair. 'Twas winter before it really left us, and in that time—in that time, boy, a sixth o' the Stratford folk were taken and the shadow o' sorrow lay on many hearthstones." She raised her apron to her eyes and wiped away the tears that had gathered there, then she went on speaking very tenderly.

"There was no shadow on mine, thank God! Only a great joy that had trembled so near the brink o' danger it had taught me how to feel for my neighbours in their woe. I wot not if 'twas because o' those dark times that my little William was dearer to me than any o' my other children were, though I loved them and love them still with a true heart's love. But he must ever be first in my affection, for my heart-strings were bound so tightly around him.

"Well, lad, he was the sunshine o' the house, and he was happiest at my side, though he ever

loved to ride on his father's shoulder, but even from there he would stretch out his arms to me to be taken and kissed and laughed over. He was the best and sweetest-tempered babe that ever lived, I warrant me. He cried but rarely, and when he did, marry, 'twas not to bellow like most children; his little lip would quiver and the big tears would grow in 's eyes; sometimes they would fall, but oftenest they'd disappear and he'd be smiling again. He was ever smiling, peradventure the fairies were whispering to him."

"Tell about the time he was lost."

"Ay, marry, sweeting, thou'lt have the whole loaf; thou'lt not be content with less. But to the tale. That was when he had just turned two in the June o' that year; 'twas on a Saturday and he and I were in this very room, he on the floor at my feet, e'en as thou art, when who should come to the door but my good gossip Mistress Quiney, and she and I fell deep in talk and paid no heed to the child. When she had gone I turned me to speak to the little one, and lo! he was not anywhere to be seen. On a sudden my heart was like a stone in my breast and my blood stood key-cold in my veins. And 'Willy, Willy, sweet,' I called, hoping to hear his merry laugh. But 'twas passing still; there was no sound abroad save the song o' the birds without in the garden, for the house-door stood open wide. Then I was

dumb with fear. Methought the fairies had stolen him away, that 'twas they who had sent Mistress Quiney to lure me from my watch, and then they had spirited him to Fairyland. I ran out into the garden half-mazed with grief, and the sunlight blinded me so that I stumbled along the path, not knowing what I did nor whither I went, and then suddenly I saw a sight I shall never forget. There was Willy standing on the grass by the elder bush, gazing up at a bird that was singing on a spray, as if he knew its song. I ran close and the bird spread its wings and flew away; then Willy turned and toddled toward me and seized my gown, and laughed and laughed again. I did not rate him; instead I caught him in my arms and kissed the dimples in 's cheeks and the creases in 's fat little neck, whereat he thrust the rose he had in 's hand into my face, and naught would content him but that I should take it myself and kiss it too."

"That was because he loved the flower, Gran, and wanted thee to love it."

"In good sooth, yea. He loved the flowers, and often would I gather them for him and he would use them for his mammets, but tenderly, too, as if he would not bruise them. All that summer, pleasant days we'd sit in the garden, or go into the meadows by the river, and he would play with the little things he found there, or he'd

listen with all his heart in 's face to the birds' songs. He loved them even then. And when he was forwearied with roving he'd nestle close beside me and I'd talk to him low and tell him little tales, or I'd sing the old carols and ballads to him, and though he was but a babe, he seemed to understand. Then I said to my heart: 'Peradventure my little child may grow to be a man whose dole it is to hearten the whole world.' Nay, then, we women often dream fond dreams o' our little babes, and how each one holdeth, belike, some great gift that, an we but knew it and could foster it with properest care, would flower into beauty. Only oftenest we do naught! And so, when I felt this feeling growing and ever growing within me as I looked into my Willy's eyes, I did bethink me 'twas a sign sent from on high, and I resolved to learn from the books that I might teach my little son when he grew old enough to commence scholar. Thou know'st I'd never been to school—there were no dame schools at Wilmcote when that I was a child—but I made shift to learn myself, and when Willy was three, though Baby Gilbert was in my arms, I used to give the little fellow lessons from the horn-book."

"The one I studied?"

"E'en so, the very same. First he conned the criss-cross row and very soon he could make the

letters, both small and big, and then 'twas no long time before he'd mastered the little words and got the 'Our Father' by heart. All that was done ere he was four years old, and he would have to reach the age o' seven before he could enter the grammar-school; so thy grandfather brought me home an Absey book and Willy learned the catechism and commandments therefrom, and soon he'd all the reading-matter safely stowed in 's little brain. Learning came easier to him than to me. Many's the night I've sat up late studying by candle-light—and studying hard—what it didn't take him long to master. And besides the Absey book there was the 'Book o' Riddles' I had as a fairing, and there were some ballads printed by good Widow Toy and the Carols. I borrowed me some books, too, from Billesley Hall, and the lad and me did read them together. 'The Passtyme o' Pleasure,' 'A Lytell Geste o' Robin Hood,' and the story o' the small boy and the Frere—I've told it to thee oft, how that the little child with his magic pipe could set the whole village dancing to his music, and could e'en make his harsh stepmother and the Frere obedient to his innocent will. There were other books besides, and then there was the black-lettered Bible yonder which he would read and read. But he was not vain o' what he could do—not he! Thou would'st never have wist from his

oearing that he knew more than other children o' his age. He was ever ready to be with them at their sports. 'Twas he that taught thy uncles Gilbert and Richard and thy sweet aunts Joan and little Nan their letters, making a play out o' it that took all the sting o' study away. He'd a wondrous way with children both big and small. They all looked to him as leader, but in their games he never wanted the best place for himself, still they'd follow him everywhere and listen to his tales by the hour—he had many, merry and sad, at 's tongue's end."

"And the dumb beasts and the birds were his friends too?"

"Yea, that they were. I've seen the birds light on his shoulder, and they never stopped their singing when he went by. But anything that was hurt, or weak, was dearest to him. His heart was so large. Yet most o' all, methinks, he loved the dogs. He'd a little beastie o' his own that followed him as Silver followeth thee."

Hamnet bent over his dog and pulled his ears gently.

"He couldn't have loved Little Sweetheart as I love thee, Silver, not quite as much. There wasn't so much to love."

"Marry and amen, that's chop-logic. As well say thy father careth not so much for thee because forsooth thou'rt little, and wert thou twice

as big he'd love thee twice as much. That could never be when his whole heart is thine already; and yet, dear wag, he hath room, and large room, for the others o' us too. Thou canst not make a measure for love; it knoweth no bounds."

"But Little Sweetheart was not so fine-looking as Silver, thou'st said so oft."

"Nay, not so fine, I wis, and not so proud neither, for Master Silver there is vain o' his glossy, grey coat; but think'st thou thy father only judged from the outside? When he was no older than thou art he found the little beast at Snitterfield, harried by some boys who threw sticks and stones at the small creature and lamed him so that he could run no more, but was e'en at the mercy o' his persecutors. 'Twas then thy father came upon them at their evil work, and though he was but one against the two o' them, he treated them to a good threshing both with his fists and his tongue till they were forced to run away, for they were cowards at heart, as all are who attack poor dumb things, or fight the helpless. When they were gone thy father searched for the little dog and found him at last under some bushes, whither he had crawled to be out o' harm's way. He lifted him gently in 's arms, for the thin, yellow body was covered with cuts and bruises and one small paw dangled helpless-like. The little creature just looked for a moment out

o' his sad, hunted eyes, then seeing only kindness in my Willy's face, he put forth his tongue and kissed the hand that held him.

"So they came home together, and well I remember the tears my Willy shed, him that never cried for his own hurts, as he tended to his little charge and set his leg with deft fingers. Truly he looked deeper than the outside; he looked into the heart o' the dumb thing and saw the love and gratefulness there, and love grew apace in 's own breast. And from that time they were always together. We all loved Little Sweetheart heartily, ay faith, heartily; how could we else when he was so thankful for the least kind word, and his body would wriggle all over did one but take notice o' him by a glance? But though he cared for us all 'twas thy father that was first in 's thoughts, as 'tis to-day with Silver and thee; he would never see him coming but he would catch up something in 's mouth an 'twere only a dead leaf, and carry it to him proudly as though 'twere a gift fit for a king. And thy father now — God bless him! — would take it with a laugh and a fond touch that would make the little creature leap and leap again for very joy. There be some who prize not a dog's affection, but 'tis not so with me. 'Tis a thing to treasure and be thankful for, methinks, for some-

times when all the ways are dark, thou canst get a deal o' comfort out o' a dog's true love."

Mistress Shakespeare leaned back in her chair, her fine, grey eyes turned toward the window, but little did they see of the summer beauty. There was a mist before them like a soft curtain that shut out the simple room and the boy's upraised face and made other things clear to her mental vision. They were far less bright than the scene before her, but she looked at them dauntlessly, as she had looked at them at the time of their happening.

"I'll never say that again about my father's love for Little Sweetheart," Hamnet broke in, after a moment of silence; "I'll think 'twas as great as mine is for Silver and then I'll know it couldn't be greater. But all the same, Grandam, Sweetheart wasn't nearly so fine-looking as Silver here."

"That he wasn't, but I do protest, la, thou makest a very peacock o' thy dog — see how proud he looketh! Nay then, Sweetheart was not so goodly to see, but suppose yon mass o' vanity was bandy-legged and always went a little lame and had great scars on 's body and a queer stump o' a tail—what then?"

Hamnet hugged the dog close.

"I should love him with all my heart, because he'd still be Silver."

"I trow so. Verily, 'tis not his beauty that maketh him dear, 'tis something deeper. They are sorry eyes that cannot see below the surface, but there be many that are thus sand-blind and judge only from the fine feathers without. We won't do that, dear boy, we'll look closer and think o' the beauty within."

CHAPTER VII

Pray you, sit by us,
And tell 's a tale.

A WINTER'S TALE.

He hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book; he hath not eat paper, as it were; he hath not drunk ink; his intellect is not replenished.

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST.

THOMAS WHITTINGTON, whose duty it was to tend Mistress Hathaway's sheep, was stretched full length upon the ground, in the shade of a spreading elm, fast asleep. He did not present a very gallant appearance as he lay there in his shepherd's attire of grey russet with his bag and bottle at his side. His long, thin legs were sprawled far apart and his blue bonnet had fallen from his head, disclosing his straggling, unkempt locks. A shaft of sunshine pierced through the leaves above and descended upon the lined and weather-beaten face which, from exposure to sun and wind, had grown the colour of the pampered prodigal's cloak in the painted cloth. It danced persistently over the great nose and into the cavernous mouth, whence

issued such rumblings and whistlings and sighings as must have frightened the sheep had they not become indifferent and heedless by this time. For Thomas was a noisy fellow, and never as much so as when he was wrapped deep in slumber. Did he clatter about the barn or in the buttery, his great shoes — set with nails — beating out a barbaric sort of music, did he speak in his gruff voice or roar you out his hearty laugh, or did he break into song, though he could get no further in it than the one line (but 'twas no matter surely, since he had no notion of tune)—why, all those sounds compounded together could not make up a tithe of the din which was ever the accompaniment of his repose.

But though Whittington slept at his task, his conscience was easy; the rough-haired little tyke at his side made an excellent deputy, and mounted guard over the shepherd's crook, keeping a wary watch of the woolly masses lying about asleep, or greedily cropping the herbage. The dog, like his master, was old, and often drowsed in the long, sunny hours; but it was always with one eye open, and woe betide the silly sheep who sought to exchange his pasture-land for another! He was shown the error of his way on the moment and made a shamefaced example of for the instruction of his kind. Nor could any stranger venture into the field without giving the

nay-word which should account satisfactorily for his presence there.

The boy singing 'Constant Susanna' as he came across the meadows, however, was no stranger, and neither was his companion, the dignified hound. The small guardian of the peace pricked up his ears at the sound of the pleasant music with its burden of 'lady, lady,' and sprang forward a few feet to greet the new-comers, wagging his tail in welcome and giving vent to his joy in great, noisy barks which failed to arouse his master. Hamnet pulled the sharp pointed ears and patted the little cur who leapt up to be caressed, but Silver passed on with an almost disdainful step, waiting for the boy to seat himself before he took up his own position near by, sitting up on his haunches and overlooking the field where the grazing sheep lay—soft, white patches amid the green, almost as if the snows of winter still lingered there. The other dog sat gravely erect, all idea of drowsiness dispelled, his eyes now turned upon his flock, and anon cast furtively at one of his visitors as if trying to read his thoughts and discover whether any envy for his own authority troubled the placid breast. He almost wished that some disturbance would occur amongst the lambs and sheep, that he might be called upon to show his power and thus awaken some spark of respect in the indifferent, town-bred

eyes. He breathed shortly, and snapped at a fly with unnecessary vehemence.

Hamnet watched his sleeping host for a few moments in silence, then with a roguish look on his face he broke a long twig from a bush near-by and stripped it quickly of all its leaves save two at the slender top. He leaned forward cautiously on one elbow and dangled the branch just above Whittington's nose, letting it rise and fall in quick succession and making a buzzing noise the while with his lips. The heavy snores did not diminish for some minutes, then there was an interval of quiet, followed by a great gasp which ended in a growl. The sleeper threw up his arm to shield his face, but the pertinacious insect darted at his ear and at the bit of brown throat left exposed to its attack. Backward and forward, wherever there was an unguarded spot, that cunning, winged thing found its way, and the buzzing increased until one would have thought a whole hive of bees had mistaken Thomas Whittington for some new species of flower, some 'love-in-idleness,' and were enamoured of his sweetness. At last the tortured man struggled up into a sitting position and waved his arms frantically about his head, crying in his stentorian voice:

"Aroint ye! aroint ye! I be e'en at my work. Can't ye leave an honust man alone? I be e'en

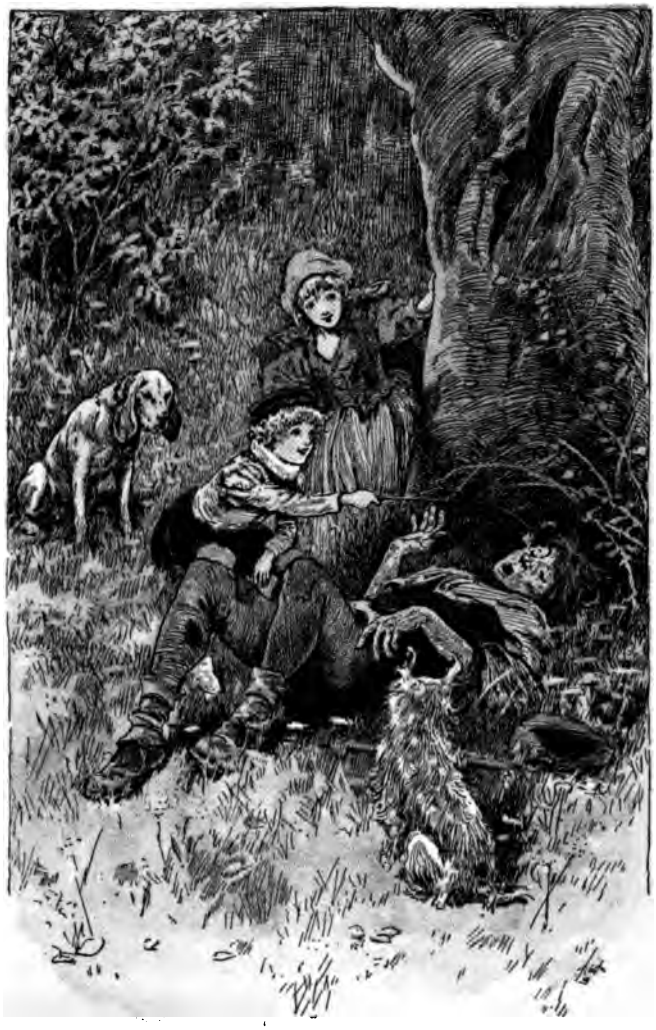
at my work watchin' o' Mistress Hathaway's sheep."

"He thinks 'tis the fairies pinching him for his laziness," Judith whispered, in delight, bending toward her brother. She had just crept through the field, and watchful Crab, seeing her coming, had gone to meet her, escorting her as Silver had escorted Hamnet a short time before.

The boy nodded in response and brought his switch down with stinging force upon the hairy fore-arm, whereat Whittington gave a roar of pain like a bull in a rage.

"Out upon ye, ye pestiferous gad," he shouted. "I did but close my eye to wink. I be an honust labourer, I be, an' one that mindeth a's duty, come wet or dry. There's meat for ye in other places than in Mistress Hathaway's meadow. Away, I say—nay, then, Crab, to't, to't."

Thus set on, Crab rushed wildly among the grazing sheep, scattering them to right and left as the wind whirls the snow from trees and roof-tops. Silver, quivering all over, uttered a deep note of approval, as the scared woolly things, with much bleating, huddled together in the farthest corner of the field. The uproar was so unlooked-for and so tremendous that Whittington threw himself over on his face and fell to kicking the air with his great feet. Then again did that saucy insect, augmented by another guided by Judith's



"He thinks 'tis the fairies pinching him for his laziness," Judith whispered.

hand, dart hither and thither, buzzing and stinging about the prostrate man's ears, while near him two voices sang with appropriate emphasis:

"'Pinch him black and pinch him blue,
O, thus our nails shall handle you!'"

The man tossed from side to side and cried for mercy.

"Let be," he groaned, "I'll e'en 'fess. Marry, I was at 'The Bunch o' Grapes' yestreen, an' there was ale i' plenty, an' the way to Shottery was grievous long, an' I comed na home at curfew; but I seed ye na—nay, that's as true as Crab hath loongs—I seed ye na at your dances. I comed straight home, though the road were long an' waverin'. My sleep's been broke—nay, then, I wull sip no more! 'Tis a parlous thing for an old man to play the lad, but 'twas an occasion—an occasion—Steve Sly put up the ale——"

His words were cut short by a peal of laughter from the children, which was like a dash of cold water over the frightened man, restoring him to his senses on the moment. He sat up and turned a half-angry, half-ashamed face upon his persecutors.

"Methought 'twas the fairies," he muttered. "But ye wull na tell Gillian; she hath a frampold way o' takin' a man up. Did she but know I'd slept at my task I'd hear nowt but that.

Wull ye keep peace? Good then, I be na feared. I' fecks 'twas parlous wrong I do protest, but 'twould never ha' happed an Crab had na been minded to watch. A shepherd's a man, hark ye, that should e'en keep ever awake for fear o' dangers coming to a's flock."

"Even so, Thomas, that's what the book saith."

"I got it from no book, truly—I know not the insides o' a book."

"We put it into English only the other forenoon," Hamnet persisted, "like this: 'Shepherds are wont sometimes to talk o' their old lives whilst the cattle chew the cud under the shade, for fear if they should fall asleep some fox, or wolf, or such like beast o' prey should fall upon the cattle.'"

Judith moved a trifle nearer the speaker, half in admiration, half in terror of what might be lurking in the thicket beyond the boundary of the field.

"Hath he not wit, Thomas?" she asked, nodding her head in the direction of the boy. "Marry, thou shouldst hear him say it off in Latin. Thou hast it memority, sweet Hamnet, I wis—come—come—say it."

Hamnet flung out his arm in a declaiming fashion and began to chant the words:

"'*Pastores aliquando dum pecas sub umbra ruminant antiquos suos amores recitare solent*——'"

"Now, what a thing learning be-eth!" Thomas interposed; "but I'd liefer ha' the English—it soundeth more familiarity. There was but a word o' thy gibberish that I'd e'en knowed afore —'twas 'dum.' By my troth, a man would soon be dumb an he had to talk that heathenish stuff! Now I praise Heaven I come o' dull parentage, an' what I ha' to say I must e'en say in few words an' fair English. But lad, go to, thou art a marvellous scholard."

"Nay, I differ not from the other boys; thou should'st hear our form go up to say the Fables. Wert ever at school, Thomas?"

"Nay, I had na toime; my father tended sheep an' I must e'en fall to when that I was a little lad. But tell me what thou dost and when goest thou to thy lessons?"

"At six i' the morning o' summer and seven o' winter, wet or cold, sunny or sweet, when one would liefer play micher—it matters not, there one must be. I'm in the third form now, and this is what I must e'en do. Every morn I must say two parts, one out o' the Accidence and the other out o' the Grammar (I'll show thee my grammar some day, with the picture o' the boys in the tree gathering apples)."

"Marry, what doth that teach? Boys need na be showed how to climb a tree and steal fruit. 'Tis born in 'em, methinks."

"Nay, sure, Thomas, 'tis the tree o' knowledge, like the one that stood i' the Garden o' Paradise, and the boys are e'en picking the fruit for their advancement. But thou bring'st me out—where was I? Oh! we say the accidence and the grammar, and then, look 'ee, each boy must form the first person o' a verb active in any o' the four conjugations. And we may go home at eleven for our dinner; but we must be back in our places at one, and so to continue there till three, or the half-hour past, then there's a rest for a quarter o' an hour; that over, lessons till the half-hour after five, and then to end with reading a piece o' a chapter and singing two staves o' a psalm and lastly with a prayer. 'Tis near six——"

"Ha' done, ha' done!" Thomas cried; "I feel the sleep comin' back to my eyelids."

"But our lessons in the afternoon," Hamnet continued, with a laugh—"nay, then, thou must hear it all, sith thou hast asked. 'Tis not so bad, I warrant, for thee to hear as 'tis for us to do, especially as Sir John hath a ferula this long, and an arm as mighty as old Sir Guy's to wield it withal, and a way o' looking from under his brows that sendeth a boy's heart down into his shoes an it so chanceth that he hath not got his lesson overwell. 'Tis strange how a glance will make the wits fly as if they were so many clouds, and his look, marry, was like a strong wind scatter-

ing them away! We have lessons in Syntaxis in the afternoon that we must e'en say *memoriter*, then must we construe and parse all the words that hold the force o' the rule. Two days in the week there are lessons in Æsop's Fables, and other two days in Cato, which we must construe and parse likewise and say out Cato by heart. And Fridays must we e'en translate those lessons into English, construing one o' them into Latin."

"Now, I give Heaven thanks the week is done."

"Nay, there's Saturday for part o' the day——"

"I be glad I be a little wench," Judith laughed, "and need not pother my head wi' such things. Girls don't have to study, and I shall always have Hamnet by to tell me what I ought to know; only I be like thee, Thomas, I'll not want to hear it in Latin, save just the little bit that maketh one hunger for the English words. But I liked that about the shepherds telling o' their old lives to keep awake. Tell us a tale now, one that's true, an thou canst not tell us something about the fairies."

Thomas glanced apprehensively over his shoulder.

"I wot nowt o' the fairies, save that they do none harm unless that they be angered thereto."

"Nay, Gillian saith they do, and 'tis best we pray to be kept from their evil devices."

"Believe it na, lass. Gillian knoweth nowt, though I be thinkin' she felt their anger herself in her young days. Doubtless she touched an elfin's ring all shinin' wi' drops when she went forth wi' the other wenches to gather May-dew, for her beauty's not overmuch to look at now. 'Tis small wonder she prayeth to be kept from their furder wroth. But 'twas she affronted 'em fust—'tis a way she hath! Speak 'em fair and do 'em no ill, little maid, so wull they only help thee."

"Dost know how to go invisible?"

Thomas shifted uneasily and turned an anxious eye upon the speaker. "There be-eth ferneseed now," he muttered.

"Oh! ay, but verily, Thomas, 'twill not work," Hamnet rejoined, in eager tones. "Once long agone I found me some, or what looked like it, and I swallowed it quick; then I climbed me into the buttery window to get at the marchpane Gillian had but just made, and she, turning, spied me and, thwack! thwack! went her broom. I' faith, I was not invisible, as my poor back could vouch. But I have heard o' a better way, and 'tis e'en like this; come close, the both o' ye, and Silver and Crab mount guard: 'Take water and pour it upon an ant-hill, and look immediately after and

ye shall find a stone o' divers colours sent from the fairies. This bear in your right hand and ye shall go invisible.'"

"A stone, say'st thou?" Judith asked, cautiously. "Is't what my Grandam Hathaway meaneth by a lucky stone, or is't what father told us was the 'losopher's stone? Wilt seek it, Hamnet, and when? Thou dost not truly think we can go invisible, dost thou?"

"Nay, then, how can I say? In good sooth I shall search for it some day, and thou may'st come wi' me, but thou must not breathe a word o' this. Come, promise."

He stretched out his little finger and linked it with hers while they both said solemnly together:

"'Ring finger, blue bell,
Tell a lie and go to hell.'"

When that ceremony was over, the boy insisted upon a repetition of it with the shepherd, and thus, having bound his hearers to secrecy, he was enabled to continue his conversation.

"An ever I go invisible," he said, sitting back on his heels and resuming his natural tone of voice, "I'll be even with Gillian for the drubbing she gave me—I'll eat her marchpane and her caraways; I'll spirit them all away to Weir Brake and feast the boys. Thou shalt have my

stone sometimes, Judith, sweet—tell me what thou wilt do with it."

"Methinks I'll hold it very close and steal soft to where Susanna and her gossip sit and listen to their talk. They've many secrets, and they say so oft when I come by, 'Hem! small pitchers have great ears,' and fall a-laughing. So I'll e'en hearken when they see me not, and then flout them after, and make as if some little bird flying through the air had whispered their sayings to me. But an thou goest invisible, fair brother, what will poor Silver do?"

Hamnet rubbed his chin reflectively; for the moment, he had left his dog out of his calculations.

"An I had the stone, I could get cates for him in plenty," he said, slowly, "but he'd liefer go without, I wot, and see me than have all the cates in Christendom. Nay, then, I'll not e'en seek the stone; thou may'st, an thou list, thou and Thomas, but tempt me not. I make my share over to thee."

Judith looked off at the sunny meadows and up at the hot, cloudless sky, then her glance came back to her companions lolling comfortably in the shade. She patted her gown softly.

"'Twill keep," she murmured, "'twill keep; there's no such hurry; I can seek the stone any time. I'd liefer stay here wi' thee and watch the

sheep; and that we may not sleep and danger come, we'll e'en pretend we be shepherds, and we'll talk o' our old lives."

"Hurrah! Jude," Hamnet shouted; "I do protest I like the game passing well. Here, thou must have the crook to hold, and Crab shall stay by thee an he were thy very dog; and, Silver, lie thou close to me—so! I'll keep thy cloak, Thomas, about my knees—the air is chill, methinks. And thou may'st have thy bonnet and, yea, thy bottle. Now we look like real shepherds, i' faith. Come, Judith, begin—begin—'tis thy own thought."

"La, now, I prithee, do not ask me," Judith protested, with more the air of a fine lady than a simple country bumpkin; "I have no wit. I'll e'en listen to thee and Thomas."

"In sooth, thou must say something, or spoil the sport. 'Tis not hard when once thou hast made a beginning. Come, I'll help thee—once on a time——"

"Once on a time—marry and amen! I can think o' naught; and yet I would not vex thee." She drew her brows together in thought; then her face cleared. "I'll e'en sing a verse from the Coventry pageant that grandam hath so oft told us of. 'Tis not new to thee, Hamnet, but it must serve, and 'tis about the shepherds."

She paused for a minute, then beating the air softly with the crook she sang:

"'As I outrode this enders night
Of three joli shepherdes I saw a sight'

("We're three jolly shepherds too, I ween!)

'And all about their folde a starre shone bright;
They sang terli, terlow,
So merrilie the shepherdes their pipes can blow.'"

"Now afore Heaven a pious song an' a godly," Thomas cried. "Sing 's another verse, wench."

After a moment's hesitation Judith went on in her sweet, childish treble:

"'Down from heavene, from heavene so highe,
Of angels there came a great companie,
With mirth and joy and great solemnitie.
They sang terli, terlow,
So merrilie the shepherdes their pipes can blow.'

"'Tis thy turn now, Hamnet," she said, when she had come to the end of the carol.

"Methinks 'tis bitter cold," he mumbled, with chattering teeth, "else 'tis the rheumaticisms hath crept into my old bones these bitter nights. A plague o' sitting here year after year!" he broke off coughing.

Judith clapped her hands in delight.

"I knew thou'dst find the way," she cried, with

no tinge of envy in her voice; "but go on—go on!"

"I mind me o' many things," he continued. "Now it so befell upon a day." He paused and cast a wary glance around.

"Nay then, brothers," he went on, in a blood-curdling whisper, "hist! there's fearsome noises abroad, and mark yon shadow stealing through the hedge. Avaunt there, avaunt!"

Judith dropped her badge of office and threw herself face downwards upon the ground, clinging to Thomas in her terror and screaming with all her might while the two dogs added their voices to the hurly-burly.

"'Tis but play," Hamnet cried, in superior tones; "thou art a very baby girl to be afeard."

Judith sat up and pushed back the curls that had escaped from her coif with a trembling hand and Thomas looked as silly as one of his own sheep.

"'Twas so very like," the little maid declared, "so very like, I could have sworn I heard a growling. I prithee pardon me for bringing thee out; I'll not be so frighted again."

"Marry, I'll not fright thee. That was not in the tale anyway; I did but make pretence a lion, or a tiger was coming for the sheep. But there! 'tis gone; we frighted him off wi' our shrieks. Well done, brave shepherds, well done, valiant

men, our flocks are safe once more. Now to my tale. 'Twas upon a day—nay, I'll not tell that. H'm! let me think. Why! Judith, sweet, I'll e'en tell a tale o' those three shepherds thou wert singing of but now. They were sore mazed that night with the star's shining; 'twas brighter than the moon and sun put together, and it danced and danced as it moved across the sky, leaving a great roadway o' light in 's track. Now, one o' the shepherds was full o' heaviness, but when he looked up and saw the star he was exceeding glad, though he knew not why. He'd a wish in 's heart and he said it o'er quick; he knew that whatever one wisheth during a star's flight will surely come true, though he wist not that when it doth happen one is ever sorry. He would not have felt that way; his was a fair wish, and thou could'st not guess it, I warrant me, an thou'dst try six Sundays running. So I must e'en tell thee.

"This shepherd had a little lad o' his own, not any older than our cousin Philip Shakespeare, and not so big nor strong; he was crookbacked and could not walk. Now it so chanced that long before, when the little lad was but a babe, his father coming home one day was wroth—he was in 's cups—and the baby, creeping out to meet him, got in 's way, whereupon did the father knock him with his crook, and the baby fell down

the deep ditch by the side o' the house. And after the first cry there was no more sound, so that the father was frighted, and gathered the child in 's arms and called him all sweet names—oh! he was sober enow then, I promise thee. 'Twas long before the baby oped his eyes, and then it fell a-moaning, and the poor man could do naught to ease the pain. Nay, Jude, sweet Jude, leave off crying, else I must e'en stop; 'twill all come right an thou hast the patience to listen.

"The baby didn't die, but he didn't get well neither—he could not walk at all and he was ever ailing. And his father loved him so much, and though he knew that the little lad loved him best o' everyone, he never could forgive himself for what he'd done, but he must needs think still and always: 'Oh, an I could only make my son well!' So there was the wish in his heart, and that night, when that he saw the star, he whispered it as he'd whispered it an hundred times before. But 'twas the strangest star! It didn't flash out o' the heavens into the nowhere; it just kept moving and shining and beckoning, each point a little hand, and all about there were soft voices crying, 'Follow! follow!'

"Then did he and his brother shepherds get them up and go after, treading swiftly till they reached a low, dark byre, and they said among themselves how strange it was to come all that

way just for that, and they were going forward. But the star stayed there with a great shining, and anon the voices cried: 'Enter—enter—worship—worship.' So they went within, and found the little Jesus lying amidst the straw with his mother sitting by and singing soft. Whereupon did each one make his reverence; but my shepherd, coming last, stopped and looked with all 's heart in 's eyes, and the woman, speaking low, said:

"'Thou'rt a good man, verily, an little children be so dear to thee.'

"And he made answer:

"'I be no good man, Madam lady.'

"Then he up and told his story, whereat the Mother Mary's tears did flow, but she said:

"'Nay, thou'rt good now, and thou art truly sorry. May Heaven's blessings fall on thy own lad.'

"And even as she spoke the little Baby Jesus smiled with his soft eyes, and put out one tiny hand. Then on a sudden did my shepherd feel his heart leap within him, and he turned and went out into the night. There was a glad song o' angels in the air all about, but he heeded it not. He'd no thought o' anything but just his little child. So he sped on, and lo! as he came to his home the door was oped from within, and there on the sill was his very own little son—straight

and strong and wondrous fair to see. And when the father stood still, as he were in a dream and could not move, the little lad ran forward and put his arms about him and led him into the house."

There was a moment's silence, then Judith drew a long breath.

"Oh! I be so glad," she cried, as she leaned across Whittington and patted her brother's arm; "'twas a brave ending, but I wish thou could'st tell what they did once they were within the house."

"I' faith! there's no more to the tale—the door was made fast. But I wot they were happy together, thus much hath floated out through the chinks and cracks. And now 'tis for Thomas to keep us awake."

"That I canna do, I ha' nowt to say. A shepherd's life be-eth a goodly life, but 'tis over-quiet; still I'd na change it for another. Here I be content wi' my sheep an' eanlings around me, an' if the sun shineth, why, welcome to its shinin'; an' if the rain raineth, why, 'tis wull for all livin' creatures. Marry, 'tis a goodly world."

"That's never a tale, Thomas," Judith interrupted, with much severity. "Thou must e'en do as we did; we'll not let thee slip. Tell us why"—she stole a glance at her brother from under her long lashes—"why thou singest 'I mun be mar-

ried o' Sunday,' and then thou art not married at all."

"Hark to the lass!" roared Thomas. "Love an' marriage—ho! ho! 'tis all the maids think on, I care na what their age. 'Od's heartlings! I'd na marry any she in Christendom. I loike my life as 'tis, wi' Crab here for my friend."

"But why——" Judith began.

"Every why hath its own wherefore," Thomas returned, sententiously, "an' I ha' my reasons." He glanced at her suspiciously, a sudden idea lighting his slow brain. "Was 't Gillian set thee on?"

The little maid brightened visibly.

"Not so, 'twas only me and Hamnet that wondered."

"I'd liefer hear a tale o' the wars," Hamnet said, coming to the rescue. "Thou wast living when Harry VIII. was king, and thou hast heard talk o' divers battles, e'en if thou hast not seen them; but an thou canst not remember any at this moment, prithee tell us why thou hast no good wife."

"Wert ever in love, Thomas?" continued the little lass, "and didst have the moon-sickness and look pale? Gillian saith thou wert a brave fellow in thy youth, and never a better tripped it on the green."

"Gillian hath her good points, i' fecks, though

she be curst o' tongue full oft," Thomas replied, good-humouredly; "she used to foot it featly too. Lord! Lord! how many years agone it is. An' yet methinks I could dance you a Rogero as wull as another e'en at this day—ay, or a Packington's Pound. There was one little wench, I mind—nay then, how was she called?—'tis gone—'tis gone. But she tripped it better than the rest, an' up an' down, an' in an' out she went. She'd eyes loike a doe's, an' as she danced the red come creepin' up i' her cheeks. I ha' na thought on her these many years, but it all cometh back."

"Thou didst love her then."

"She were a very madcap witch wi' her songs an' her laughin', but I loved her na; I did but love her dancin'. There was another maid hight Joan, an' we'd made it up atween us to marry. An' then, look ye, being a woman an' fond, she'd e'en ha' it I cared more for the lass I danced with; so she flouted me sore, whereat—nay, I were but a lad—I hied me to all the fairs an' wakes, an' danced an' danced just to show Mistress Joan I minded nowt her words. Then she up an' married a lout from Coventry, an' so the tale's ended."

"But what o' the other—the maid wi' the roses in her cheeks?"

"Why, I wot na; dead, surely, 'tis so many years agone."

"Peradventure she did love thee," Judith said, softly.

"I can na say; she'd a merry tongue an' a light heart, but after Joan went away I sickened o' dancin', an' they said the little wench came no more to the Green neither. So there's an end on't! Wull! I be an old man, now, an' I ha' had a fair life—sunshine an' shade, an' sunshine again. I owe no man an' I envy no man, least o' all that lout i' Coventry Joan married forty years agone come Hallowmas. They say a made a good end an' a were glad to go—she grew so sharp o' tongue. Nay, I envy no man a's happiness; 'tis enow for I to be here wi' Crab. I ha' saved by a tidy sum, an' it shall all be thine some day, lad."

"Not so, Thomas," Hamnet cried, "though I thank thee. I need not thy moneys, surely, and so my dear father would say. Give it where 'twould be more needed; there be the poor in Stratford, thine own home town."

"Soul an' body o' me! I'll do what I wull wi' my own. It shall be thine an I list, or the poor's. H'm!—that thought likes me wull, though I mean na for Stevie Sly to ha' a groat o' what I ha' laboured for. But soft! how long the shadows ha' grown."

CHAPTER VIII

Beshrew me but I love her heartily!
For she is wise, if I can judge of her;
And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true;
And true she is, as she hath prov'd herself;
And therefore, like herself, wise, fair and true,
Shall she be placed in my constant soul.

MERCHANT OF VENICE.

An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an angel.

HENRY V.

IT was long past high noon when Hamnet, with Silver tagging close at his heels, walked slowly through the Market-place. At that hour it was almost deserted, though several belated housewives, who were reputed to be unthrifty, were 'washing of their clothes' at the Town-pump and hanging them on the Cross to dry, the whiles their tongues were more nimble than their fingers. The smocks and the hempen towels flapped softly to and fro in the faint, warm breeze, and the air was noisy with the buzzing of the flies gathered close about the meat which some butchers had also hung there earlier in the day.

Goody Baker was brushing the square industriously with her broom of twigs. She was a lit-

tle, spare old woman bent almost double with age and the result of her occupation, and as she moved about at her work, with her dark gown bunched up at the back, she made one think of some curious bird. So that Silver, being of that mind, forgot his dignity, and bore down upon her with a sharp, yapping noise, which made her leap a foot or more in the air, letting the shovel which she carried under her arm fall to the ground with a great clatter. She turned a wrathful face upon Hamnet, her small, deep-set eyes shooting forth venomous glances.

"Away wi' thee," she cried, brandishing her broom in menace, though she kept ever on the other side of the boy; "mind the dawg, or I'll brain he. A-frightin' o' a body this away. I wull to the Bailly about it, an' a wull gi' thee a threshin' for settin' o' great beastises on an old wummun as doeth her duty in rain or shine from sun to sun. There's na idlin' here; go to Gaffer Raven—keep he to 's work. I warrant me a breshes na Sir Hughie's bridge as clean as I doeth this Market-place."

Hamnet laughed and whistled Silver close. There was a feud of long standing between the two street-cleaners, each one accusing the other of idling, and each jealous of the other's supremacy. Of the two, Hamnet preferred Old Raven, who had charge of the bridge, and who, besides,

was a splendid hand at a story and ever ready for an excuse to pause from his labours. Goody Baker was like a little, clattering, chattering magpie, with a temper like a witch, and there were those who hinted that she did strange things with her broom when the day was done. Some of the rougher boys pestered her shamefully, tracking mud and brushwood over the places she had spent hours in cleaning, and then mocked her at a safe distance from her broom while she made the spot hideous with her imprecations and threats. Hamnet had ever thought it a shame to tease her, but now he came in for a full share of her anger.

"La, Goody," he cried, soothingly, when she was forced to pause for lack of breath, "Silver meant no harm; he's full o' life this day, and belike he thought 'twas some kind o' game to see thee hopping about; but he'll not fright thee again."

"Na, I wull see that a doan't," the old woman muttered. "An' hoppin,' say'st thou? Marry, the Muster Bailly wull show thee what hoppin' be-eth. I'll tell he maself how young Muster Combe set 's dawg on ma poor heelses."

"I'm not Tom Combe," the lad interrupted. "My name is Hamnet Shakespeare, and I live in Henley Street at my grandfather's house."

"Oh! ay, forsooth, I knows thee wull. Mus-

ter Wully Shaxper—a that's play-actor i' Lunnon—'s thy faither. A gi'ed I a saxpence when a was here last, an' a saith there was na such shinin' stuns i' Lunnon as here. An' that to I an' na to yon witless loon, Raven, at the Bridge. An' a saith, besides, that oncet i' Lunnon town, when the Queen were passing by, the stuns there be-eth so dirty she'd a-mucked her shoon, but a young gallant from the coort spread 's cloak down i' the mud, so that she went o'er 'thout 'filin' o' her feet, an' she made a lord o' he on the spot. But an I'd been the Queen, I'd ha' gi'ed he a tonguin' for usin' 's cloak that away. Wilful waste maketh woful want, an' a wull coome to that some day. An' thy faither saith the Queen 'ud need na ploosh cloaks here whur I be wi' ma broom. Dost think she wull ever come this way?"

"I' faith, I cannot tell. She was at Kenilworth when that my father was a little lad, and there was monstrous fine doings there, he's told me o' them oft, but she came not hither. Like as not she'll not leave London, where 'tis so grand."

"Go to! 'tis not so grand. Thy own faither saith my stuns be cleaner; a saith that to I, an' a gi'ed I a saxpence besides, an' a saith that oncet the Queen——"

"Yea, yea, I know; but I must hasten now," Hamnet interposed, "so give thee good den."

"An' a did na say that to Raven naythe r," the

old woman bawled after the boy. "'Twas just to I. An' so thou mayest go thy ways; I wull na tell the Muster Bailly, for thy faither's sake, for a gi'ed I a saxpence an' a saith——"

Happily for Hamnet, however, he was already out of hearing, giving vent to the mirth which he had so manfully suppressed in Goody's presence. It was the first time she had taken him into her confidence, though Raven, with whom he often foregathered, had always much to say in praise of his father. For sweet Master Will Shakespeare, riding to and from Stratford, had ever a nod and a word for the bridge-cleaner, and something better, look you! than either. Something bright and clinking that found its way, or soon or late, to the Bear or the Crown in Bridge Street, and thence, liquefied, to Raven's inner man; at which times he would not have exchanged his state—no, not for the Master High-Bailiff's, nor for a king's for that matter!

Hamnet, once away from Goody's noisy tongue, walked quickly past the Market Cross. At one side he could see the pillory and the whipping-post, and he knew there must be a man in the stocks, for a group of idlers hanging about jeered at the unfortunate, whose case was like to be their own at no distant date unless they mended their ways. The boy tossed his head impatiently, and a hot flush crimsoned his sensitive

face, while he clinched his little brown fists. He had small toleration for those who, when a man was down, were ready with their taunts and mockery; that was the time, according to his mind, when one should give nothing but sympathy.

"An I were the Master Bailiff," he said to himself, "I'd set 'em all in the stocks for baiting a poor wretch so. 'Twould be a monstrous good thing for 'em, I warrant."

He turned into High Street, forgetting on the moment his amendment of justice in the inspection he bestowed upon Master Rogers's fine new house. He had watched it building with the greatest interest, following with delight the master carver's hand as the fleur-de-lys and the interlacing designs grew on the wood-work in front under the skilled fingers. Now it was quite complete and the family had moved in, though there was still a bit of the workman's scaffolding beneath the second story windows where the finishing touches had just been put to the letters "A. R.," which stood for Alice Rogers, the second wife of Master Thomas Rogers, whose initials, with the date of the year, also decorated the front.

Hamnet's feet lagged a trifle as he glanced at an open casement where a green curtain stirred softly in the breeze. He knew all about the room

within. His mother was Mistress Rogers's good friend, and had already seen the interior of the new house, and this especial room, with the window seat just back of that pretty curtain, whereon there were three fine cushions, also made of green.

"Good-morrow, little page o' all loves," a girl's voice above him called softly. "Whither away? An thou hast an idle minute to spend come in, thou and thy shadow, Master Silver."

Hamnet's hand went up to the flat, gray covering on his auburn locks, and he off-capped in the direction of the window.

"Is't thou, sweet Mistress Kate?" he asked, eagerly. "Silver and I were off to Aunt Joan's; a letter is but now come from father from London town, and I must acquaint her with it, so hath my grandam saith. But there is no such hurry. I' faith, 'twill keep; 'tis only the bad news, they say, that travels quickly, and this is the blithest, blithest news. My father will be coming hither in a scant four weeks' time, and oh! Mistress Kate, he hath writ me a letter, besides, and a verse o' poesy with his very hand. I have it here, fast by my heart. I would show it thee, an thou carest to look."

"Indeed, la, I do care, so come up, sweeting, the door is not made fast. I am all alone in the house, save for Marian, in the buttery. My father and mother are away to Coventry."

The next moment, for scarce longer it seemed, both boy and dog were in the pretty new room, where the light coming in at the window through the curtain was like the summer sunshine flickering through the leaves in the woods. A little golden fleck, where the curtain sagged between the rings, danced persistently upon young Mistress Katharine Rogers's winsome face beneath her demure little cap. She was leaning back against the cushions, her lute held lightly in her lap; but at Hamnet's approach she laid it down on a stool and rose to greet him, kissing his upturned face fondly, and pulling Silver's ears with her pretty hands.

"Thou'rt welcome," she cried. "Come, sit thou here, dear heart, and tell me what's the news abroad. How doth all thy good people: sweet Mistress Mary Shakespeare and thy sweet mother, too, and how is my dear gossip, Sue? And what makest thou from thy afternoon lessons, fair sir?"

"Why, 'tis a half-holiday. Methinks Sir John will not live long, he hath grown so kind o' late; or belike he is fathoms deep in love with some gentle lady, for he is so monstrous dove-like."

"I pray Heaven she will not make him wear the willow," Mistress Katharine laughed, "else will you boys feel the birch. The trees grow side by side."

Hamnet rubbed his shins apprehensively, and made a droll grimace. "Amen!" he answered. "I' faith, I hope she'll love him passing well, for our sakes, if not for his own."

He looked for a moment about the room with its new adornings, its bits of tapestry on the walls, and its high-backed settle near the chimney, which was also flanked by two capacious chairs. Then his eyes came back to the girl at his side. She was just budding into womanhood, a fair slip of a maid with a roguish glance, and a sweet, oft-recurring smile, and a low voice that was ever singing. Hamnet felt all a lad's love for the pretty creature, who was a few years his senior, and yet who seemed to care for his companionship. He had worshipped her after the fashion boys have, from afar, glad of her smile when she met him, and treasuring up the remembrance of whatever words of greeting she let fall, and dreaming often of the time when she would guess what was in his heart for her. Then, when he had least expected it, there had come that happy day on which she had rewarded all his faithful devotion.

And this was the way it befell: There was a gathering of young people at old John Combe's house, that which had once been the college in Old Town over against the church. She was there, and Edmund, who was near her age, and

the other big boys had formed a train about her, urging her to dance, or sing, or play at stool-ball in the wide gardens. Hamnet was one of the little fellows just looking on. He remembered distinctly how he and Tom Combe and Francis Collyns, his two dear friends, had crowded with the other children about the window when the first sound of the fiddles within, squeaking out the notes, 'Kiss Her,' heralded the 'Cushion dance.' 'Twas always such rare sport to watch.

Edmund Shakespeare held the cushion in his hand and danced about the room, skimming over the ground as light as ever swallow dipped above Avon. He bore himself right bravely that day as Hamnet was more than ready to admit. He was fond of his young uncle in the main, though he could not always conquer his jealousy when Ned talked so much of London and brother Will. At such moments he almost hated the fresh-faced stripling. In every other thing they were the best of friends, and the little lad, looking on at the dance, was proud of the graceful figure flitting hither and yon. Suddenly his heart gave a great thump under his Sunday doublet, for Ned had dropped the cushion right in front of pretty Mistress Katharine Rogers, who half-turned her back upon her kneeling suitor. Hamnet clinched his fists. Faith, now, but Ned was a daring wight!

The gay tune went on mockingly for a minute,

then Ned lifted up the cushion and turned him toward the end of the room where the fiddlers were sitting and sang: 'This dance it will no further go.' When he had finished his wail the musicians, affecting a great show of interest, sang in their turn: 'I pray you, good sir, why say you so?' At which he sang again: 'Because Katharine Rogers will not come to.' Whereupon the fiddles scraped furiously as 'twere a lot of hornets let loose, and the music-makers—an they were very gods and ruled mankind—roared out right lustily: 'She must come to, she shall come to, and she must come, whether she will or no.'

So Ned, with a sly twinkle in his eyes—the rogue, for well he knew the rules of the dance—laid the cushion down again and knelt thereon, and the maid, with many pretty floutings, knelt too, whereat Ned sang: 'Welcome, Katharine Rogers,' and kissed her blushing cheek. That done they both rose them up and bore the cushion between them, singing: 'Prinkam, prankum is a fair dance, and shall we go dance it once again, and once again, and shall we go dance it once again?'

Then it was her turn to make a choice, and Hamnet, from his post at the window, felt his heart leap again, but with a difference. Ned's seeking her out showed that to his thinking she was the fairest in the company (as was the truth!),

but it was no sure sign of her own feelings. 'Twas only now that she was to make her selection that they would be known, and the youth she chose was the one to be jealous of and to fight with and overcome—in one's dreams, if nowhere else.

Mistress Katharine Rogers took the cushion from her companion and advanced alone into the centre of the room. She darted one swift glance around at the merry-makers in the wide circle and at the on-lookers thronging the windows and doors; then she stepped forward to one window, and the westering sun, peeping in at the sport over the heads of the children, kissed her fair face unrebuked. She came on and on, the dimples deepening in her rosy cheeks, and suddenly she cast the cushion before her on the floor.

There was a stir among the small boys like the little murmur Avon makes lapping the cool green rushes along its banks. Tom Combe nudged Francis Collyns slyly in the ribs, as though to say: 'Thou art the lucky man!' whereupon Francis threw back his head proudly and stretched up a full inch, while little Tom Quiney laughed boisterously in his shrill fashion. Only Hamnet stood very still. He was glad his rival was to be about his size—there was such a good ducking place in a pool hard by! His head was spinning and the fiddles mocked him in his misery. He stared resolutely at the top of the

door opposite; but though he was thus blinded to what was taking place, he could still hear Mistress Katharine's voice as she sang despairingly: 'This dance it will no further go.' And then, when the musicians had asked in their turn for her reason, she sang again, and there was, oh! such a little, pathetic hint of heart-break in her sweet tones: 'Because Hamnet Shakespeare will not come to!'

Why, he didn't wait for the musicians' commands—in one bound he had cleared the window-sill and was kneeling before her while they were still singing. What did he care for the shouts of merriment all around? She sang 'Welcome!' right heartily, and kissed him on the lips, and then, before them all, she took a flower from her gown and kissed it softly and stuck it behind his ear. So they both rose and sang, 'Prinkum, prankum,' and throughout the rest of the dance they were side by side until the end, when, everyone being in the ring, each went out as he came in, with 'Farewell!' sung instead of 'Welcome!'

Since that day's pleasuring at the Combes', a twelvemonth gone now, she was ever his true lady-love, and had bestowed many favours upon him. Now 'twas a gilt nutmeg at Christmas-tide and anon a little hankercher of less than four inches square, wrought round with silken thread and with a small tassel at each corner and a tiny one in the centre. She had shown

him how to fold it in four cross folds so that the middle might be seen, and had bade him wear it in his cap, as the Court gallants did wear the like favours which their ladies gave them. (And Grandam Hathaway, who ever liked to know the cost of things, said ''Twas worth twelvepence, and no mistake.' But his other grandam, when that he boasted thereon, had rated him right soundly for her sweet tongue, and had said: 'The gift was worth the love that prompted it and not the money it had cost!')

On his last birthday she had given him a silver ring with a posy within, and on St. Valentine's day he had caught her famously, standing without her house long ere the sun had risen, and when she came to her window to see who 'twas that sang, before ever she had a chance to speak he had called: 'Good-morrow, Valentine.' At which, recognizing his voice, she had dropped her silver-gilt pomander to him, bidding him wear it always for her sake. Then she had dressed quickly, and calling him within doors, they had waited at the casement until the other boys, coming after the sun had risen with their cries of 'Good-morrow, Valentine,' met with no reward but only laughter, and were told they were 'sunburnt' and bidden hence in disgrace.

Still he would not have all the giving on one side, and so he had ever some little gift for her.

At Christmas-time there had come a pair of sweet-scented Cheveril gloves from London town, paid for out of Master Will Shakespeare's purse, which the little lad bestowed upon young Mistress Rogers. Proud as he was of that gift, he did not feel half so happy as when he bought her a tawdry lace from the mad pedler's pack on May-day with his last pence (for gingerbread nuts and little gauds for all one's family soon swallow up a lad's savings). In other ways, too, he could show his thought of her. He never could come empty-handed while there were flowers in woods and meadows waiting to be gathered, or berries twinkling in the sun. He could plait a basket out of rushes, or carve some little thing with his whittle. And when these were lacking, any story that he had read was like a gift to her. Even this day, when he had not expected to stop at her new home, though outwardly he bore no present, what greater riches could he share with her than those precious words which rose and fell with his heart's beating? He thrust his hand into his jerkin, and she, noting the action, cried out:

"Prithee, sweet, show me thy letter without more ado. In truth, la, I love thy good father passing well, as who doth not? He hath ever a kind word for us all, both old and young, and what better news could'st thou bring than that he is e'en coming hither? I' faith, I shall want to

see him mightily, though when I hear o' the wondrous plays he hath writ I could find it in my mind to be afeared o' him, though my heart doth counsel otherwise."

"The heart's the best guide, so saith my sweet grandam oft; and sure methinks 'tis true in this case, for there is naught to be afeard on when father's by. See, here is the letter."

He drew the paper from his breast and read the superscription proudly: "To my most loving and dutiful sweet son, Hamnet Shakespeare;" then he unwound the silken thread which bound the packet and laid it upon the cushion at his side.

"'Tis writ in my father's own hand," he said, as he smoothed out the folds with a caressing touch, "and 'tis not over easy reading, neither, though 'twas no pother to me, sith I know all his quirks and curls—so I'll e'en read it out to thee. It runneth in this wise:

"'Alderliefest'" (and that meaneth 'dearest o' all;' 'tis my father's own heart-name for me—I'll tell thee, anon, how it came up; but to the letter):

"'ALDERLIEFEST: 'Twill be a short month, now, by man's count, before I see thee, but a long, long month—for every day is that—by mine own heart's reckoning. When 'tis done I shall be at home with thee and the other dear ones for a happy space. Then will the hours fleet quickly with thee, my young rover, for

thou dost ever make a July day short as December, and 'twill be sunshine everywhere, no matter how the sky may seem to other eyes.

"'Herewith do I enclose a bit of poesy, such as thou hast ever begged of me. I writ it the other night, and thou and love are still my argument. My time bids me to hasten to an end. The Lord be with thee and with us all. Amen.

"'From Southwark, near the Bear Garden, the 18 day of June, 1596.

"'Thine in all love and kindness,

"'WILL SHAKESPEARE.'"

The boy raised his shining eyes to his companion's face, without speaking, as he finished the letter, and she leaned forward and touched his delicate cheek fondly.

"Marry," she said, softly, "how he doth love thee, dear wag. We all do, as thou knowest full well, but thou'rt very near his heart."

"As he to mine," the boy cried; "thou canst not guess how close. Nay, then, I can't abear that others be near him and I away. If I were only big and strong! There's Ned, now, who goeth to London shortly. I almost wish some harm would befall him to keep him still at home——"

"Peace, peace! What would thy father say, an he heard such words, sirrah?"

"Verily he would be sore grieved, I wis, but the thoughts choke me by night and day, when I bethink me o' Ned's dole."

"That's not like my little page o' all loves! I would not have thee grudging another's happiness, sweet, nor would thy father, I trow. Ned's his brother and dear to him, but an thou judgest from thine own heart—and thou hast said the heart's the truest guide — thy father's love is greatest for thee. Truly, la, thou'lt not be greedy and want it all for thyself, when others hunger for a share."

Hamnet hung his head shamefacedly.

"Thou dost not understand," he murmured.

"No, faith, not I. An I was so sure o' my father's love as thou art o' thine, I'd trust him to the end."

"Why, so I will," Hamnet interrupted, throwing his head back, his small face working with determination, "so I do. Only there be times that I wonder and wonder about the day when I shall truly be with him, and I never can make it quite clear in my mind; often 'tis one way, often another, but ever so distant, till that I am out o' heart with longing."

"Soul o' me! I never took thee for a puling lad before. Out upon thee! Thy father would like thee to bear a brave heart, I wot—but there! I'll rate thee no more. Thou'lt mend thy ways? And so clap hands, and a bargain."

"Ay, that I will," the boy cried; "I'll do Ned no ill turn, I promise thee — not even in my

thoughts. But, now, I must away to Aunt Joan's, and ere I go I needs must tell thee the poesy father writ—I have it already by heart. I prithee touch thy lute, sweet and low, whiles I say it off."

He stood before the girl, with his head thrown back, his eyes looking into hers, and she, to humour him, fell to picking the strings of her instrument, but softly, too, so as not to lose a word.

"'What's in the brain that ink may character
Which hath not figur'd to thee my true spirit?
What's new to speak, what new to register,
That may express my love or thy dear merit?
Nothing, sweet boy; but yet, like prayers divine,
I must each day say o'er the very same,
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,
Even as when first I hallow'd thy fair name.
So that eternal love in love's fresh case
Weighs not the dust and injury of age,
Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,
But makes antiquity for aye his page,
Finding the first conceit of love there bred
Where time and outward show would show it dead.'"

His fresh, young voice broke as he reached the end, and the next moment he came close to Mistress Katharine and humbly kissed her hand where it lay upon the lute.

"Chide me not," he whispered, tremulously. "I'll try to grudge Ned naught; when the feeling cometh upon me I'll say those words over."

For all answer the girl put her arm about the little lad and pressed his face tenderly against her own. So they rested for a short space in the gracious quiet of the pretty room, while the curtain at the window swelled softly in and out, like a small sail under the command of Sir Breeze, and irregular patches of sunlight dotted the floor with gold

CHAPTER IX

O, that a man might know
The end of this day's business ere it come!
But it sufficeth that the day will end,
And then the end is known.

JULIUS CÆSAR.

A noble nature
May catch a wrench.

TIMON OF ATHENS.

HAMNET lay face downward in the lush grass, his head resting on his arms, his slender legs, in their blue, homespun hose, idly kicking the air. Silver was couched at one side, but well removed from those heelless russet shoes, which described such remarkable revolutions, having been forced, by a wisdom learned from experience, to place a considerable distance between him and them.

There was an open book in front of the lad, propped up against a stone; but he was not reading, nor had not been for a long while past. From all around there came the sweet stir and scent of the Henley Street garden, the little hum of the busy insects, the booming of some bee-lovers hovering around the flowers, and the

gentle rustle of the baby breeze as it lisped its half-forgotten message to the leaves of the elder bush near at hand.

Hamnet followed some gaudy-winged butterflies with speculative eyes, as they darted across the green, sunlit spaces; then his glance fell upon the open page before him, and rested there for a brief time. How dull it was! After all, the true place to study lessons was within doors, away from the temptations of earth and sky—some place so tightly sealed that not one of the thousand, happy summer sounds could penetrate its way to its interior—and especially not those shrill whoops that came ever and anon from the meadows, where some boys were playing at prisoners' base. It was impossible to nail long Latin sentences into one's memory when there was so much else of real note to engross the attention, and when underneath all—like the undercurrent in the river—there pulsed the thought that father was coming home. Study? The thing was unheard of. The boy tossed the book, with ruthless hands, high in the air, and laughed to see it fall ignominiously into the heart of the elder bush, startling some young birds from their nest. They whirred off to a safe distance, and upbraided the disturber of their peace with feeble, remonstrant voices.

"I' faith, the Latin is no more to their taste

than 'tis to mine own this day," he cried, with a hearty laugh. "I'll have none o' it—not I. Come, Silver, we'll away."

He rolled over on his side, and made as if to fondle the dog's ears with his upstretched hands; but Silver was burrowing in the bush after a new species of game. He turned, with the book in his mouth, and shook it again and again, worrying it as if it were some rat, until a shower of leaves lay on the grass about him, like the petals of a monstrous flower.

"Out upon thee for a pestilential, destructive rogue!" a voice cried sharply from the other side of the bush. "I'll teach thee, thou fat good-for-naught, what all the books couldn't learn thee—I'll thresh thee so thou'lt not soon forget this day's schooling."

Hamnet sprang to his feet, his face—that had taken on a look of mingled dismay and fun at the mischief Silver had wrought—working with anger. At any other time he would have called out a laughing explanation; but something in the unseen speaker's tones awakened all the unreasoning furies in his breast. It was like the gunner's match to the trail of powder.

"Thou'lt not lay a finger on my dog, Ned Shakespeare," he called, defiantly. "Thou'lt reckon wi' me first."

"Ay, that I will, or first or last, it matters

not," the voice replied, with an ironical laugh; "but I'll not stand by and see property destroyed so wanton-like by that pampered beast, young Master Cockerel, were he thy dog or the Queen's."

The speaker came around the bush and faced the raging lad. He was a tall, fresh-coloured youth, with something of arrogance in his bearing at that moment. Silver moved hastily out of reach of the strong, lithe arms.

"Thou'lt not touch my dog," the boy repeated; "an thou dost, thou'lt rue it to the longest day o' thy life. Besides, he deserveth no punishment; 'twas I that threw the book, and so set him on."

"Marry, I'll learn him, then, not to follow thy behests," Edmund said, with flashing eyes, angered beyond control by his nephew's tones. He made a lunge forward, as he spoke, and cuffed Silver smartly on the ear.

"An thou knowest not the worth o' books, it shall be brought home to thee," he muttered.

"Thou'rt but a sorry hand to do that," Hamnet sneered, white with rage; "'tis not overmuch thou canst tell us about the worth o' a book, especially an it be the inside."

"How!" cried Edmund, hotly. "Art ready wi' thy jibes? Dost dare outface me, thou little braggart? An thou wert near my size, I'd pound thee into mince-meat."

"Size or no size," Hamnet flung back, "I'll fight thee. I'm not afeard o' thy brawny fist, Ned Shakespeare. An thou'dst lift it against a poor, innocent beast, thou'rt no better than a swasher, anyway. Thou'dst not wait for one o' thy inches to fight thee—'tis but an excuse."

"Nay, then, I'll take no eggs for money," Edmund answered, with a darkening brow. "An thou outmatchest me with thy learning, Sir Knowall, and thy quick tongue, my hands shall still do me some service."

He advanced threateningly upon the boy, but Silver, with a low growl like distant thunder, rushed between the unequal combatants. The hair on his glistening back stood stiffly erect, his tail was straight from his body, and his eyes were like lightning in their vivid gleam.

"Down, sir, down!" Hamnet cried. "'Tis not thy quarrel. Thou art my very own, and I'll pay back with interest the blow thou hast received —trust me for that. Thou wouldst not turn on thy foe when he did strike thee, for that he beareth a name we both do love, though he is all unworthy o' it; but thou'lt not see me hurt, brave heart, brave Silver. Be off, sirrah!"

Ned's face flushed.

"Nay, keep thy safeguard, little one," he answered, bitterly. "Thou dost valiantly to taunt a man when he's by. I'll fight thee not. I'd

fight thee not at any time; thou'rt too low for fighting, wi' thy taunts. Thou'rt safe; but 'tis not for thy sake, thou little, puny, woman-decked thing, but for thy father, who is dear to me."

"Bring not my father's name into this quarrel," Hamnet cried, beside himself with anger; "and get thee hence, Silver—begone, begone——"

He stamped his foot furiously until his champion, with his tail hanging dejectedly between his legs, had retreated to the house; then he turned again on his adversary.

"So now I have no protector save only these," he said, with a long-drawn breath as he looked down at his clinched fists; "but thou shalt feel them, I trow."

He made a rush forward as he spoke to deliver the blow, but Ned caught the small bare arm in its flowing white sleeve just above the wrist and held it between his iron-like fingers as in a vise. After a moment he let it drop with a short laugh. The boy fell back only to gather fresh strength before he came whirling on again. Ned stood unmoved by the renewed attack, like some great rock against which the little waves beat in vain. He caught his assailant about the middle and held him at arm's length away from the ground.

"I'll not fight wi' thee, little lad," he said, contemptuously; "there's a shaking, sirrah, for thy saucy tongue, and here's another to mend thy

manners withal—that's the treatment thou meritest. I am no scholard, i' faith, but I yet know what's meet for such as thee. And so good-day, my young bull-calf."

He relinquished his hold, and the boy, dizzy from the rough handling he had received, reeled a few steps and caught at a tree to keep from falling, while Ned, as though he were not concerned in the matter, turned on his heel and strode away whistling 'Green Sleeves' merrily, his handsome, careless face carried a degree higher than was his custom.

Hamnet looked after him impotently, clinching and unclinching those useless fists of his. Everything was in a whirl about him. He took a step forward. His ears were full of that gay, rippling music that grew fainter with every passing moment. It was like a goad to his soul.

"Nay, then, I hate thee, Ned Shakespeare," he cried, in a fury—"hate thee, hate thee, and I'll be even wi' thee for this some day, if I needs must wait till the end o' time or go to Terra Florida to find thee."

He flung his defiance out mightily, and for answer there came back to him the sweet lilt of the tune from the ever-growing distance—a mere thread of a sound, like the ghost of an echo—and, near at hand, the glad song of a bird overhead in the boughs of the apple-tree and the murmurs of

the bees about the hollyhocks a-row by the garden wall.

He remained motionless for some minutes, his quivering face turned in the direction whence that gay music had come, deaf to the other sounds about him, and blind, too, to the fairness of his surroundings, which never before had appealed in vain to his loving eyes. The whole world seemed dark to him. At last, with his chest still heaving with passion, he threw himself upon the ground near the mutilated Cato, which had been the cause of the outbreak—though only the slightest of causes, as he knew full well. Ned's wrath at the sight of the torn book might have been easily diverted. One little word of explanation uttered in the right tone and the youth, who had no love for musty Latin, would have been the last to chide Silver for his misdemeanor, but to defy, to threaten, when the right was so manifestly on the elder's side, made the explanation, when it did come, of slight moment, and the later taunt nailed the injury fast.

Deep in his heart Hamnet was conscious that the real reason of the quarrel lay in his own bitter jealousy of Ned's good fortune, that and nothing else, and his face flamed scarlet as the remembrance of the jibe he had let fall flashed into his mind. He moved restlessly.

But surely what Ned had said was unpardonable —'too low for fighting,' 'little puny thing,' and

'woman-decked.' He dragged at the embroidered collar of his shirt in sudden fury. Why need his every-day shirts be stitched with gay-coloured threads? Not another boy in school wore such womanish gear. He hated—hated it! Must he be flouted for that and for all the foolish fondnesses those about him chose to bestow? He saw everything through his blind, unreasoning anger. And 'little lad!' Of a truth, the taunting had not been all on one side. Little—little, forsooth? That was something he'd mend with the years—those slow, slow years.

He struggled into a sitting position and rolled up his shirt-sleeve, which was open to the elbow, with a swift motion; then he balled his fist quickly, bringing it up to his chest, and looked down with eager eyes at the slight swelling of the muscle under the smooth skin of his upper arm. He pulled down the sleeve hastily, with a gulping sound in his throat. His skin was as white as a girl's, only the forearm was respectable and brown, like other boys'. Little—puny! Nay, Ned should eat those words some day. And what he had done to Silver was even more unpardonable.

Hamnet felt on the moment something moist and soft against his cheek. It was like the gentle touch of a snowflake, though they come not in the summer-time. He threw out his arm gladly and drew Silver close to his side.

"Now Heaven be praised, dear heart, thou'rt come again," he murmured fondly, caressing the dog with tender hands the while; "thou wouldst not see me harmed; thou wouldst fight for me—I that am too puny, they say, and too low for fighting—I that cannot even serve thee with these poor fists o' mine."

An angry rush of tears blinded his eyes to the love in the dumb, uplifted gaze.

"In truth thou art my only friend," he went on, working himself up into the belief that all the world was set against him, and taking a mournful pleasure in the loneliness of the position which he thus conjured for himself—"my only friend; and thou wouldst serve me, too, so that Ned would jeer no longer at me. But I'll none o' thine aid; I'll fight him yet till that he bites the dust."

A trifle mollified by these threats, Hamnet came back gradually to a realization of his surroundings. The world was still a dreary place to him, though little by little a hint of its real fairness was creeping over him and stilling those thoughts of revenge in his breast.

He had ever been above petty meannesses, and though his fists were ready at any time to serve a friend or one who was weak, he quarrelled but seldom on his own account. For all that he was a true boy, as full of mischief as an egg is of meat—one who was willing to play truant when the

fish leaped in the stream, or there were fruits or nuts to gather; quick, too, at sport of any kind, and ever foremost in the pranks at the schoolmaster's expense. But he had no love for underhand dealings; what was fair and open to the day appealed most to his taste; and yet the only way he might reach Edmund was by those very means. His face darkened. Well, why not? he argued to himself; they were surely fair if one were the smaller. A throng of suggestions surged into his mind. He had only a few days in which to compass his vengeance. But at that thought some other, springing up in its train, made the boy suddenly lower his head. Only a few days! He kicked at a toadstool impatiently, and his foot came in contact with one of the scattered pages; the rustle was like a little sigh. He sat up then and began to whistle, while Silver, with a joyful bark, sprang to his feet; he had hardly recognized his master in the sullen, brooding lad.

"Thou art a very mad-cap," the boy cried, "and this is all thy work. Nay, I'll chide thee not," he went on, as he crawled on his knees over to the fallen book and began to pick up its torn leaves, at which Silver, undismayed by any serious reflections, frisked about in unrighteous delight at the memory of his deed.

"Marry, 'tis a small jest, to my way o' thinking," Hamnet remonstrated, though the light was

coming back to his eyes, "a sorry jest. But there! mine is the blame, and a stitch or two will put all right again. And as for the back—why, 'twas broke long since, as mine will be on the morrow, I trow."

He stopped in the midst of the sentence to laugh heartily.

"Nay, I could not get my lesson *memoriter*—'twas too much to ask. On a half-holiday, too! An I had not tried, this never would have happed. I should have been off wi' Tom and Frank, an I'd been wise."

He got up a little soberly and walked slowly to the house, with Silver bringing up the rear, tail and ears hanging dejectedly again — their owner quite unequal to the task of comprehending his master's varying moods.

Meanwhile the boy was hoping that he would find his grandmother within; the book must be mended before the morrow, and hers were the safest hands to have the charge of it. He knew how his mother would cry, at first sight of the wreck, that Silver was an arrant villain, and even when he told her that he—Hamnet—was alone to blame, she would still chide and chide again, and frown at Silver, though in the end she would sew the book right fairly. But his grandmother would be different. First she would hear what he had to say from beginning to end without a

word on her part, working all the time at her task with such brave stitches; then, when he had ceased speaking, she would say something—oh! just something short, and always with a little smile. He did not think she'd be over-angry, and there would be no sharp word for Silver—that he knew quite well; he could even imagine her laughing, though gravely too, for she loved not to see books mishandled.

But if he told her one portion of the story, how could he keep back the rest? Those keen eyes of hers had such a way of seeing the very heart of things. Nay, then, he hoped she would not be there; he was not minded to tell aught of the quarrel; that was between him and Ned, and women would not understand. There was no fear that Ned would say a word concerning it—and like as not he'd clean forgot it by this time. He'd such a sunny heart he seldom kept an affront long. Even in his anger against his uncle Hamnet was generous enough to admit that much, though he felt a bitter twinge of resentment at the idea that his wrath should seem of such slight moment to the youth.

The house-door, leading into the garden, was set wide, but there was no one in the little snuggery at one side of the small entry, nor in the large living-room. Hamnet peered in cautiously before he entered with noiseless steps. Every-

thing was very quiet, save for the bird in the willow cage, which chirped blithely as it turned its little sharp eyes upon the new-comers.

On the settle was Susanna's work-basket with a bit of white cambric, in which her needle was quilted, lying across the top. One of the cushions had fallen upon the floor, thus disclosing a book, as if Mistress Sue had been reading between her stitches. Hamnet knew the cover at a glance; 'twas the 'Book of Merry Riddles,' and no doubt Susanna was getting some off by heart against their father's coming. Push! as if their father had forgot the Book of Riddles.

Not far from the settle Mistress Anne Shakespeare's lute lay across a chair, and a little stool in front of it told the boy more plainly than any words could have done that Judith had been picking out the music of different songs. Her work lay in a careless heap on the ground, where she had dropped it when she had been summoned away. He picked it up half-curiously. If the needle were a big one he saw not why it should not serve him. Sewing, marry, looked easy enough; 'twas just to put in and draw out again, and he would trouble no one to help him, since they all kept aloof from him that day. The needle, however, was not to be found, and what thread there was was in a sad snarl. Judith had been setting a little vine-like trimming about the

handkercher, for such it was. It was a goodly sized napkin, too, such as a man might carry. Hamnet laid it down with a sigh. 'Twas Jude's first grown-up work. But there! 'twas not for him; his handkerchers were smaller; like as not 'twas for father, or for—pshaw! what had put Ned in his thoughts?

He went over to Susanna's work and made as if to take out the needle, then he half drew back his hand in the fear that he might pull the thread and so mar all. What beauteous stitches Sue took! He did not know the name of a quarter of them, but these were fair enough to have been made with the fine point of a painter's brush. And blue, too—he liked blue best. 'Twas a brave, brave collar, and Sue was a sweet wench to make it for him. He paused with it in his grasp; then, casting a wary glance around, he drew it about his throat. 'Twas world's too wide! He pulled it off quickly, and the needle pricked his finger, causing a tiny drop of blood to stain the spotless fabric. He inspected it ruefully for a moment. A brave collar surely, and not for him, and too gay for grandfather. 'Twould look passing well on father—or—or—Ned. Hamnet dropped the work in a fury; he had Ned on the brain that day.

It was very still all about him, but from the floor above there came the occasional sounds of

footsteps, and someone was singing fitful snatches of song. Hamnet walked over to the narrow flight of stairs and went up a few steps, pausing then to listen. It was Judith's voice half-chanting a verse of 'Constant Susanna':

"'There dwelt a man in Babylon,
Of reputation great by fa-ame,
He took to wife a fair woman,
Susanna she was called by na-ame.'"

The girl broke off suddenly and was silent for a few moments, then she resumed the song as if there had been no interruption:

"'A woman fair and virtuous,
La-dy—la-dy—
Why should we not of her learn thus
To live god-ly?'"

"Jude," Hamnet called, as she finished with a laugh—"Jude, what dost thou?"

"I be up to my eyes in work, sweet ape."

"I prithee come hither, I've summat to ask o' thee."

There was a rush of flying steps, and the next instant Judith's rosy, laughing face appeared at the top of the stairs.

"I may not go to Shottery," she cried, breathlessly, "I may not out o' doors, I may not e'en budge from here. Sue and me are unpicking o'

Ned's murrey coloured doublet to have it ready against his going. Go away. Buz!"

Hamnet's face clouded, but he stood his ground.

"Where's my mother?" he demanded.

"She hath gone to Mistress Sadler's for the rest o' the day, and she hath ta'en her stitchery wi' her. My godmother will show her a new stitch for Ned's shirt. Verily, my grandam saith we'll make him as fine as any Sir in London town; they shall not think to flout a Stratford lad for country fashions."

"Nay, Judith, come back to thy work," Susanna cried, impatiently; "'tis little enow thou hast done, what wi' thy hoppings about and thy songs. Leave Hamnet be, unless he's minded to help us unpick this; he must not bring us out."

Minded to unpick Ned's doublet! Hamnet put up his hand to his throat as if he were choking. What! make a girl of him at once and be done with it. The whole house seemed to go up and down before his eyes. Ned's doublet—Ned's shirt—that collar and handkercher in the other room were Ned's too—and what else?

"Where's gran?" he called, in a voice shaking with rage.

"In the buttery, methinks," Susanna replied, calmly, "an she be not already gone to Aunt Joan's. She'd some ruffs o' Ned's to set and colour wi' starch before she went. Seek her there.

But what hath come to thee, sweet boy? Thy voice soundeth as if thou hadst a quack, or else thy mouth were full o' summat. Hast been in the store-room, sirrah?"

Hamnet did not wait to answer, but rushed headlong from the house, through the quiet garden, sleeping in the afternoon sunlight, out into Henley Street and away—he cared not whither. Nor did he notice that his trusty Silver loped as usual at his side. There seemed to be a thousand demons within him, lashing him with unseen whips on and on, their voices rising in a whirl of discord—a deafening tumult that filled his ears until they were on the verge of bursting. And 'Ned—Ned—Ned—' they cried. Turn where he would there was naught to be heard but that hateful sound.

CHAPTER X

The time of life is short!
To spend that shortness basely were too long,
If life did ride upon a dial's point,
Still ending at the arrival of an hour.

HENRY IV. (Part I.)

But, O, how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes!

AS YOU LIKE IT.

HAMNET sped along the Warwick road, soul-sick and tempest-tossed, a prey to his evil passions. He had been governed by no particular desire in making his selection—one road was as good as another to his thinking that day. He had but stumbled into this by the merest accident, though it was ever a favourite with him. He kept on doggedly with downcast eyes until, tired and panting, he halted at last for breath, and, like a person waking from a heavy slumber, glanced wonderingly around.

He was about a mile from the town, and there on his left were the Welcombe Woods. Just beyond them the Dingles—a belt of straggling ash and hawthorn, which went winding irregularly

through briery hollows and depths of vivid green where, earlier in the year, the blue-bells swung their tiny chimes — climbed from the footway below to the summit above, while immediately around rose the Welcombe Hills, from whose heights his father loved to look down upon the peaceful valley. The thought was like a cool hand laid on the boy's fevered brow, and for the moment those hideous voices were quiet in his breast. He pushed on over the familiar ground, thinking of the last time he had travelled it in his father's company, and recalling every detail with such loving exactitude that when he reached the crest of the hill it almost seemed as if that beloved presence were by his side in very truth.

He paused and looked back at the tranquil scene, at the orange and gold of the maturing fields, and the rich, deep greens of the bosky acres with their broom groves and hazel copses. Before him, right in the track of the homing sun, Stratford lay among her orchards and gardens, the thatched roofs of her cottages showing plainly, with here and there an occasional roof of tiles, to mark the habitations of the less conservative owners. Above them all the square tower of the Guild chapel stood sturdily aloft, and farther along the wooden spire of Trinity pierced the cloudless sky with its slender point. And that thread of molten light quivering now in this spot,

now in that, was the Avon bearing its waters to the sea. Beyond the sweeping curves of the river lay the undulating valley of the Red Horse, shut in by the misty Cotswold Hills.

The little lad drew in a deep breath of satisfaction at sight of so much loveliness, and some of the peace and quietness about him crept into his troubled breast. After a few minutes he threw himself down upon the ground, and Silver, who all this while had kept discreetly in the background, came wriggling forward. Hamnet opened his arms wide, and the dog, with a joyful bark, crept close, nestling his head against the breast of his master's sleeveless jerkin.

"How fair it is," the boy whispered dreamily into the attentive ears, forgetful at that moment of what had driven him hither. "My father doth well to love this place. He saith there is no fairer in all the world to him."

He broke off with a sound in his throat that was half way between a sigh and a sob, and the old, bitter feelings surged afresh through his soul, sweeping away all the beauty of the summer land, as a current, breaking its bounds, submerges everything in its headlong course.

No fairer in the world? Why, London was that, for any spot would be fairer if father were only by. The boy's heart was full of contradictory emotions. One moment he longed with all

the ardour of his nature for his father's home-coming, the next, with a singular inconsistency, he wished as strenuously that that coming should be deferred. What did it mean? What did those three days hold that he was willing to let them go? The happiness of seeing his father again, of hearing the deep, gentle voice, of meeting the smile in the tender eyes, of being with him constantly—was he content to relinquish all that wealth of joy because of the parting on the dark morning of the fourth day? What did that fourth day mean, that he could let the pain of it rob him of the delight of the other days? Was it only the dread of farewell that made him shiver, or was it that picture—that hateful picture—of Ned's happy face turned Londonward that blackened everything?

'Twas too much to bear! The humiliation of being young, of being little, while his heart was as big as any man's with longing, hurt the child like the sting of a lash. And Ned?—Ned only five years his senior, riding off into that enchanted land by father's side. He gritted his teeth together and clinched his small fists at the mere thought. How could he stand by the road and wave good-by to that dear figure turning ever and anon in his saddle for a last look, while Ned turned, too, with glad shouts?

What pleasures that journey held! He had

travelled it in his fancy times beyond numbering. It almost seemed as if he knew every inch of the way and just how the land looked on either hand, for nothing had ever been too small for the father to note or to tell again and again to the attentive ears of the child. Now they had left Shipston behind and had crossed the Combe, where Long Compton straggled on both sides, and they had had a goodly glimpse of The Whispering Knights, clustered in a circle about their king, standing in stony silence under the spell of an enchantment centuries old. After which loitering, forward to Chipping Norton!—there to halt for the night. Off the next day, riding through Enstone, Over-Kiddington, and Ditchley, past the walls of Woodstock Park, through Woodstock itself, and so by Bigbroke and Wolvercold into Oxford, to The Crown, in the Cornmarket, where they would lie the night.

Away again in the early dawning, just as Charles's wain was fading from the sky on the third day's journey, travelling long miles over bad roads—through Whatleie, Thetisford, Stockingchurch, to East Wycombe, where they would halt again for a night's refreshment. A start betimes the next morning would bring them to Uxbridge in the forenoon, and then there was a longish ride to London, which they would reach in the soft evening glow of the fourth day, travelling through

the fields to the water-side, where, having left their horses at some inn, they would take boat for Southwark.

The colour deepened in the boy's cheeks, and he forgot that he was there on Welcombe Hill, with Stratford lying before him, so real did the imaginary journey seem. And in a little while now 'twould be Ned's dole to see all those wondrous sights, hear all those wondrous sounds.

At Southwark with father! Going with him, mayhap, at an early day to the old church whose walls were washed by the running river, and where, in ancient times, the fisherman's daughter used to row the folk over the ferry. 'Twould be like father to take Ned there and show him old Gower's monument, with the marvellous coloured figure lying on the tomb, and they would read the inscription together: 'Pour ta pitié Jesu regarde—' Nay, then, he could not remember the rest of it, but that much was right he knew. And Ned would go to 'The Bear Garden' to see the sport there, and to 'The Curtain,' and, better still, to 'Blackfriars,' and he would sup at the Tabard, or the Falcon, or some other ordinary. Marry, 'twould take more fingers than he had a hundred times over to count all those wonderful places that would be calling to the country youth: 'Come, see me! come, see me!' whenever he took his walks abroad.

Hamnet groaned aloud. Nay, he cared not so much that Ned should see those things, and that was true, i' faith. Ned was welcome to them; he was welcome to all the sights in Christendom. What hurt the loving, jealous heart was that Ned should be admitted into a companionship from which he was debarred. The promise the little lad had made to young Mistress Rogers was forgotten, swept from his mind as completely as the December winds clear the boughs of any clinging leaves. Not one word of his father's poesy, which he was to use as a charm to expel his bitter, grudging thoughts, came to him now. He rolled over and hid his face on Silver's firm side, and then, because he was only a little fellow after all, he gave vent to his feelings in a torrent of deep, tearing sobs.

Silver tried in vain to touch with his tongue the bit of cheek left exposed, but no lovingest demonstration of sympathy that day could have penetrated through those evil passions that were piling themselves up into a mighty wall in the small heart. Jealousy, hatred, revenge—how fast they were building, until it almost seemed as if all that had made his world so fair would be lost sight of forever! Only one thought in the midst of that enveloping darkness was clear to the lad's mind—the way to make Ned suffer!

He'd listen to no plea for forgiveness. What!

should he be outdone by a dog? Silver, who had meekly suffered punishment for his own fault, had shown his teeth and had been ready in defence when his master was threatened. Should the master do less? He was not fighting for his own injuries now, but for his friend's sake. Only—only—wicked and savage as the small heart was, the truth would out that in taking up the dog's cause he was secretly gratifying the grudge which had ever been as a thorn in his side. The idea of revenge was as sweet to his mind as the taste of any cates to his palate.

After a little, the whirlwind of passion subsided somewhat, the tears which had made his cheeks burn with the sense of his utter childishness vanished, and he lay quite still looking up at the segment of sky which was revealed through the leafy branches overhead, a multitude of plans crowding in upon him. At last, utterly wearied and sore dismayed by his thick-coming fancies, he nestled closer against Silver and fell asleep.

But even in his slumbers he found no relief from his evil thoughts; the idea of punishing Ned pursued him incessantly. It sang itself again and again, like some curious lullaby. Now, with a burst of wild music like the clash of arms, he found himself on a vast heath accoutred in Sir Guy's famous armour, and up and down he strode calling upon his enemy to meet him in single

combat. And suddenly Ned, in his simple country dress, with no mightier weapons than his fists, faced him dauntlessly. And there was no fear in his eyes, but just a soft glance that made them like a certain pair of eyes the boy knew and loved best in all the world, and the great sword trembled in the upraised hand and turned to a wisp of straw—powerless, powerless.

The lullaby went on. There was the faint swish-swish of the river amongst the grasses, and he was flying by in a boat which had wings and skimmed along the water like some great bird, so that it needed not his guidance. He sat idly in the stern and watched the familiar banks now closing toward each other as if to whisper some secret, now retreating and leaving a wide space between, like friends estranged. Here the water danced and sparkled in the sunlight, there it lay unruffled in the shade of the willows that bent low above its glassy surface to catch a peep at their hoar leaves. Then out he passed into the wide reaches again, with only sky above and something dark on the wind-rippled waves—Ned, in mid-stream, clinging with desperate hands to a plank to keep from sinking. On and on the boat flew, and now Ned had caught at its side, and his face was aglow with the hope of deliverance come at last. But the occupant of the boat bent forward and sought to detach those straining

fingers; he raised his oar to beat them back; and then Ned's voice cried: 'Little lad!' not tauntingly, but tenderly, like unto another voice; and the oar was flung aside, and the great bird of a boat bore two passengers safely home.

Over and over again, through that troubled sleep, the same thoughts wove themselves in an unending chain—encounters with Ned in all the unlikeliest places of the earth, encounters where the dreamer was ever on the point of winning and in the end Ned won. But at last the lullaby slipped into sweeter strains. The rhythmic beat of a horse's hoofs coming along the London road, coming ever nearer! A cloud of dust whirled like powdered gold in the sunlight, and out of its midst there dashed the bravest figure the watcher had ever seen. He ran forward, and now he was at the side of the horse, and now—now, the figure bending low, caught at his hand and drew him up. Ned! Could he think of Ned at such a time? With his father's arms about him and his father's cheek on his, could he think of Ned—hate Ned?

Revenge and jealousy, which, even in his dreaming, had held him as their slave, sped away as the mists of the morning fall back before the freshness of wind and sun. The little lad stirred with a glad cry, half-awake; then, reluctant to come back to this working-day world, he settled

himself more comfortably, seeking to steep his drowsy senses again in the exquisite bliss of his latest dream. The quietness of his surroundings and the peace in his heart soothed him almost immediately into a deep, restful sleep.

When he woke, an hour later, the sun had slipped away from the fields, and the shadows, that all through the afternoon had grown long and longer across the land, had merged into one great shadow. The air, as the day declined, had turned chilly, and from somewhere on the hillside a bird lifted its shrill note; otherwise, it was very still. Hamnet sat up and rubbed his eyes, half-bewildered as he gazed about him; then gradually he recognized the familiar place. Of course 'twas Welcombe Hill, and he had been asleep, and on a holiday, too. But why? He started nervously, memory touching him at every point. There was no need to ask the question a second time. Silver stretched himself with a noisy yawn and moved joyously about his master, who had fallen into a dejected mood again; suddenly he paused in his friskings, and uttered a growl at the sight of two figures in the near distance. The boy turned his head at the repetition of the angry sound.

"What ails thee, true heart?" he demanded. "Marry, cannot a body pass on this hill without thy leave? Who is it, sir? Nay, I see as well

as thou dost, and I cry thee pardon. 'Tis Diccon Hobday and his sworn brother Wat Cawdrey; and thou lovest them not, I trow, nor do I neither. We'll not go home in their company, so get thee into yon bushes, and lie close. They have not spied us yet."

Hamnet crawled into the underbrush as he spoke, his hand on the rude leather strap which served for Silver's collar, and boy and dog crouched down behind the leafy screen.

They had not been concealed for more than a minute or so before the two youths appeared. They were hardy, country striplings—the eldest, a thickset, muscular fellow, with a black-browed, scowling visage, and a trick of hanging his head as if the thoughts he carried in his noddle were unworthy for him to lift it to the gaze of honest men. His face, which was never comely at the best of times, was disfigured by a recent cut reaching the length of one cheek. He limped a good deal as he walked.

"Beshrew me, I'll go no furder," he cried, coming to a standstill so near Silver that Hamnet had to put a hasty hand over his mouth to keep him from snapping at the gray hose within such tempting reach. "Perdition snatch that villain, say I! He hath lamed me past cure; but I'll make him limp yet, or my name's na Diccon Hobday. I'll spoil his pretty steps so that my Lord

Hunsdown i' London town will have small use for such a stumbling lout in 's company."

"And I'll help thee, as sure as day," put in his friend, eagerly. "He broke my pate Rogation week, and he's in my books for more besides; he said I cheated at shovel-board, and set the rest against me."

"A pest upon him," the other interrupted. "He talks so big about London, and swells like any farmyard cock wi' pride o' Brother Will. Let Brother Will take him and keep him. I'd na weep my eyes out an he never cometh back to Stratford."

There was a faint rustle in the bushes, as though the breeze was setting the leaves there in motion.

"As if, forsooth, no other body here around can sing a song or dance a dance but just Ned Shakespeare," Diccon went on, sneeringly; "and he will have it he'll play sometime before the Queen. Go to! I'll lay a saxpence to nothing he never makes a leg before her."

"Ay, but he says he will, and for aught we know he'll mend up old plays like 's brother and set 'em fair. He saith he is to help him in all that he doeth. Marry, Ned thinketh he's o' such import that Brother Will must needs come riding home top-speed to fetch him back to London."

"Then I'll stay his going," Diccon thundered. "I'll stay him wi' these two hands an I have to

budge the whole earth to do it. What! shall we see him go riding off by 's brother's side as though he owned the world? Nay, an thou'lt na help me I'll find those that will. I've a plan here that will set Ned Shakespeare where he ought to be."

"I'll help thee," a shrill voice behind them cried—"I'll help thee. Back, Silver, lie down, sirrah!"

CHAPTER XI

How should I be revenged? If this be true—
As I have such a heart that both my ears
Must not in haste abuse—if it be true,
How should I be revenged?

CYMBELINE.

Let's further think of this;
Weigh what convenience both of time and means
May fit us to our shape.

HAMLET.

BOTH youths started apart as though the earth had opened at their feet, and whirled around only to see a slender little fellow with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes bending eagerly forward, holding a great hound in check. Diccon's face darkened as he took a step in the child's direction, his fist raised in menace.

"Out upon thee, thou lily-livered patch," he cried. "I'll teach thee to listen to thy betters and hear what's na meant for thine ears and then go blab. I'll pound thee into dust an thou so much as breathest a word o' what we've said."

"Nay, I be no tale-bearer," Hamnet answered, hotly, drawing himself up to his greatest height,

"and so let me pass. Thou need'st not be afeard I'll speak o' what I heard. I did but offer thee my service, and that in right good earnest, i' faith; but an thou'lt have none o' it, go thine own ways and let me e'en go mine."

"Thou'lt na stir an inch until it is my will," Diccon blustered, the scowl deepening between his heavy brows. "You Shakespeares be fine folks, forsooth—the one a braggart, the other a listener and a tattler."

"I be neither o' those names," the little lad cried, with a choking voice; "I'd not stoop to neither. 'Twas true I was in yon bushes. I hid me there when I did see thee coming, because I thought thou'dst pass right on and I'd tarry till after thy going."

"Ho-ho," Diccon sneered; "belike we're na fine enow company for one whose father's a play-actor i' London town and whose uncle will e'en be one."

"Speak naught o' my father, else thou shalt have a taste o' Silver's teeth to match the beauty spot thou already hast."

"Dost threaten me wi' thy cur? Beshrew thee, I'll shoot him where he standeth wi' my stone bow."

"Nay, nay, peace, I pray thee," Wat Cawdrey interposed; "the lad spoke us fair enow, Diccon, and was ready wi' 's help. Thou'lt mar all wi' thy

black humours, and the quarrel is only wi' Ned Shakespeare anyway."

"Why true—true," Diccon stammered, backing down from his high horse, the more because he feared the fierce gleam in Silver's unwavering eyes; "I meant nowt by my words, lad. I be willing enow to speak thee softly and to take thine aid too as 'twas offered. Thou wert na cozening us?"

"Marry," Hamnet returned, standing his ground firmly, "I meant it in very truth. I've a quarrel wi' Ned too. He—nay, 'tis betwixt us two, but 'tis a just quarrel. Only I cannot fight him because I be not his size and he'll have naught to do wi' me. And I cannot wait till I'm a man; 'tis so long till then—so very long." His voice broke a little and he paused to steady it.

"But I'll not let him go hence still flouting me," he continued, with a dash of spirit. "An thou'lt not put me on the track o' getting the better o' him, I'll e'en work out a way in my own mind."

"Why, that's my bully-rook!" Diccon cried, slapping the boy on the shoulder; "and I'll find thee an hundred ways to get even wi' thine uncle —or one will serve. And thou need'st na give the wherefore o' thy quarrel; keep thine own counsel. Marry, I wot thou hast just reason for na loving him."

"Ay, that I have! An thou knew'st it thou'dst say so too, as any would; but at home, i' faith, they're all for Ned and his going to London town wi' father."

A shrewd gleam passed over the lowering, watchful face, which only intensified its ugly character, as the sun in its course lights some loathsome spot, and even as it brightens it shows but the more plainly its abominations. Diccon Hobday was no fool. In a trice he had read the secret of the transparent little heart before him. Let the boy keep the cause of his quarrel said or unsaid; it mattered not—here was the right string to play upon! He glanced over at Wat Cawdrey with a quick wink of his small black eye.

"A just reason," he said, thoughtfully, "a very just one. I doubt na that. I'll na seek it out, but I tell thee an I were in thy shoes I'd na like to see Master Ned put before me i' the matter o' going to London. Lord! Lord! how strange things come around. 'Twas only this very day I said to Wat when we were coming back from Warwick and were e'en speaking o' Ned's fair fortune—'Why,' says I, 'an what Master Schoolmaster saith be true, Hamnet Shakespeare is the better scholard o' the two lads, though he is na so old. 'Tis a pity now,' quoth I, 'that he hath na a few more years to his count that he might be going away instead o' Ned.' So were we talking to-

gether, him and me, when Ned and some o' his mates come along. We all drew up for a few words, and I wot na how it befell, but the thought o' thee was still in my mind, so I spoke right out and said:

"'Tis true then, thou wilt only keep the place for thy nephew.'

"Whereat Ned was mightily wroth, and quoth he: 'I keep the place for no one; I am to be to my brother as his own right hand.'

"'How?' said I, stung by his tone, for I had spoke him fair. 'I leave it to all here: is't na a son's place to be his father's right hand?'

"Then were they all loath to speak, but Wat—who hath ever a pretty love o' justice, and is as full o' courage as a tabour is o' sound—called out right boldly: 'I' faith, 'tis true.'

"That angered Master Ned the more—so that he fumed and blustered, like any wench ready for the ducking-stool—and he said, stamping about:

"'There be sons and sons, just as there be brothers, and my Brother Will hath ever a sharp eye to what is best; he knoweth that o' the two—his son or me—even an we were both o' one age, I'd serve his purpose more fully. He hath a pretty affection for the little lad; but it is only a child, and weakly, too. My brother hath other plans for him, though his cake is mostly dough

where the lad is concerned; but wi' me now, he seeth 'tis in my buttons to rise and do him honour.'

"And so Ned bragged on, wi' more about thee than I will na say, only it was worser than aught that went afore."

Hamnet's legs trembled beneath him. He had not realized until that moment how really tired he was, nor did he understand the strange sensation of numbness that was creeping over him. He had caught a little chill while sleeping, no doubt. He sat down on the ground by Silver, and made a pretence of adjusting the collar, though his fingers shook with that new feeling of weariness that had taken possession of him. After a brief pause he looked up.

"And this was—when?"

"An hour or so agone," Diccon answered. "Nay, I'll keep naught back. Dost see this hurt upon my cheek? 'Tis thine uncle's mark, but I'll write me yet as fair an answer on 's own face. And he hath lamed me, too. Marry, this was the way o' it. There was more o' his boasting, and I could na stand it, but up and told him my mind. 'I'll make the lad's cause mine own,' I said, 'as all honest men would do. An thou'rt na a coward, meet me here and now.' With that, we stood off to fight, though I was na i' the trim and he was well-breathed. When we were about

to begin, I wot na how it was, but my foot slipped, and down I went me full length. Whereupon did they all cry out—his friends and my good Wat—'Stand off! hit na a fallen man!' But Ned was on me in a moment, beating and kicking me mightily. The others made no move to drag him away—save only my sweet Wat, and him they overpowered and beat when they saw what my fine gentleman's will was. They follow him an he was something come down out o' the skies, and they would na cross him for worlds. So Ned kept up wi' 's pommelling, and I'd cry for no quarter—na I! 'Tis thy day now, Ned Shakespeare,' methought, 'but the wheel will turn.' At last, when his fists would serve him no longer, he fell to rating me wi' his tongue, most shameful; and when his breath did fail him, then went he off to sport him furder wi' his talk o' Brother Will and London. Say I na true, Wat?"

"Oh! ay, ay," Wat stammered, lost in admiration of his friend's narrative powers; "every word's gospel true."

Hamnet sat quite motionless, staring before him with unseeing eyes, his hand still on Silver's collar. He hoped they would not expect him to speak; he had no word to say—as yet.

"So that's how matters stand wi' thy uncle and

me," Diccon said, after the silence had grown unbearable to him. "'Twas for thy sake I suffered, i' faith; but he hath put an affront upon me that I'll na pardon. I'll pay him back yet. Wilt thou help me an thou canst?"

"Ay," Hamnet answered, unflinchingly. "Tell me what I must do."

"Nay, wilt thou swear it? Come, thy hand!"

There was the faintest trace of hesitation on the little lad's part, then he took his right hand from Silver's trusty neck, and placed it in the grimy, outstretched palm.

"So," he said, softly, "I swear it."

Silver gave a low growl.

"Have a care to that beast!" Diccon exclaimed. "I mislike the way he eyes me."

"He meaneth naught," Hamnet cried, hastily; "he is as gentle as any lamb." Then, with a swiftness born of inspiration, for his heart was sick within him, and he longed for home, he added: "Belike he's thinking o' his supper; we must away."

"Nay, there's our plan first; thou must na go yet. Woul't break thy word?"

Diccon turned a suspicious glance upon the small figure, with a sudden tightening of his fists and something like a snarl in his tones.

Hamnet's face flushed. He was too low for fighting, too little to be trusted. How dared

they treat him thus? It was too bitter to be endured.

"A Shakespeare hath never broke his word yet," he answered, proudly, "and I'll not be the first to do it, trust me. An what thou say'st is true —and ye both say it is—I have less cause than ever to love mine uncle. But let that pass. An I loved him, I'd still see him punished for what he hath done; so e'en tell me quickly o' thy plan, sith it waxeth late, and I must hasten home."

"When doth thy father come?"

Hamnet drew in his breath sharply. When?— There was no need to hesitate. Had he not kept count of the lagging days on everything that came within his reach? Was it not his last thought at night, as it was his first in the morning? He lowered his head.

"Not to-morrow, but the next day."

"A-Saturday, then. Thou'rt na cozening me? Come, speak out bold."

"On Saturday, sure."

"And when goeth hence?"

"On Tuesday morn."

Silver stirred under the pressure of the small hand with a low whine of pain.

"Humph!" Diccon ejaculated. "Well, that suiteth my purpose as good as another. Marry, sweet Ned Shakespeare, I'll be ready for thee by then."

He sat looking before him for a few moments without speaking, while Wat Cawdrey regarded him in open-mouthed delight, and Hamnet retained his position, stroking Silver softly, his heart like a heavy weight in his breast. Somehow, he did not even care to hear how Ned should be punished. He had no wish to think of Ned, for back of his sunny, handsome face he could see that other face, that would be set Londonward o' Tuesday morn, grown suddenly graver than its wont.

"O' Tuesday," Diccon said, speculatively, his voice breaking in upon the little lad's musings and dispelling them roughly, though he was not sorry to let them go. "O' Tuesday be it! But before then there cometh Monday night, and I'll give thine uncle reason to remember that the longest."

Hamnet shuddered despite himself at the hatred in the threatening tones. It seemed to him that he was in some sort of a trap that with every passing moment narrowed more closely about him. There was no possible way of escape.

"What wilt thou do?" he questioned, faintly. "Marry, I must know."

"And so thou shalt, my jolly bawcock; take heart! Trust all to me; thy cause is in my hands. O' Monday night, after curfew hath struck, thou must find the chance to give a message to thine

uncle, but thou must so manage it that he'll na suspicion us. Belike 'twill be better coming in the form o' a letter; thou art clerkly, and can write it in a hand he will na know. But more o' that anon; there may be a letter, or no letter, as I shall devise. 'Twill only be a few words at best —meet an old friend, and the place named, or something o' that sort. And when once thou hast given it, thou may'st get thee to bed wi' a light heart, and in the morning thy father will ride forth alone."

"But Ned?" Hamnet whispered; "thou wilt not kill him?"

"Beshrew thee! who talks o' killing?" Diccon growled. "An I hear thee say that word again I'll brain thee on the spot. I be no murderer; I'll but give Ned Shakespeare his quittance for this debt, and there's an end."

"But thou wilt despitefully handle him," the little lad continued, unabashed, "and I would not have that happen——'

"Thou wouldst na have that happen?" Diccon sneered. "And what is thy lordship's will? Shall we treat Master Ned to sweet words, and give him cakes and honey? By my troth! thou mind'st me o' the cat i' the adage, that would have fish and would na wet her feet getting it. Thou'rt bold and thou'rt na bold. Thou wouldst see thine uncle punished, and anon thou criest at the

mere notion o' his hurts, like a girl that's pricked her finger. 'Tis scant thought he'll give to thy feelings, once he's away wi' thy father, and why should'st thou think o' him?"

"I think not o' him," Hamnet retorted; "go on wi' thy plan."

"I know thou'rt to be trusted, little Shakespeare," Diccon resumed, "though most fellows o' my age would keep their own counsel, and use thee but as their servant. But that's na Diccon Hobday's way, which is ever a fair and honest way, and 'tis in great part thy quarrel too. Well, here's the very simpleness o' my scheme: Thou givest thine uncle word to meet a friend for one last parting. So he cometh him to the spot where Wat and me be waiting i' the dark, wi' mayhap another tall fellow or two, and we rush out and overcome Master Ned and bind him fast, and bear him away down stream to a little hut I wot of i' the fields, and there we'll leave him. Is't not a fair jest? And when he waketh, belike 'twill be the next night, or betimes o' Wednesday morn, and he'll be summat sore from the drubbing he's had. But what o' that? Many a lad at school getteth a stiffer threshing for an unlearnt lesson. When my fine gentleman starteth for home thy father will be well on his journey, and Ned must tarry, forsooth, till he cometh again. La, Stratford 'ull be but a sorry place wi' one's thoughts

all for London; but beggars may na be choosers, and thine uncle will have a tamer tongue in 's head, I warrant me, after this dose. So thou wilt be avenged for thy quarrel, whate'er it may be. I' faith, thy father will be wroth, and will set Ned down as a promise-breaker and a carouser, and so belike someone will never go to London, after all."

"But that will not be true," Hamnet interrupted. "'Twould not be right for my father to hold such thoughts; I could not——"

It was the last flare of the candle of righteousness, the last assertion his conscience made against the network of evil that was binding him fast.

Diccon sprang to his feet with a loud imprecation, and the small lad would have suffered grievous harm at his hand had not the watchful dog leaped suddenly forward as his champion.

"'Tis too late for thee to say what thou could'st na do," Diccon cried, keeping a great control over himself; "'tis only now what thou canst. Think on that! Thou hast sworn to help us, and I'll e'en give thee a thought to spur thy craven spirit on. An I'd no stomach for this fight, 'twould keep me from faltering just to remember how Ned hath meant—ay, and still meaneth—to cozēn thee from thy father's love. I did na tell thee a tithe o' what he said; I kept it back from sheerest pity. 'Twould poison thy life to

the longest day o' it, an thou should'st come to Gaffer Castrell's age, could'st thou but know."

"I'll not know, I'll hear no further word," Hamnet gasped, with something like a sob, half of grief, half of anger, choking his utterance. "I'll do whate'er thou wilt, and thou may'st do what thou wilt wi' Ned, only let me——"

"Ay, ay, my little chuck, I'll say a word for thee," Wat Cawdrey chimed in readily. "What sayest thou, Diccon, to letting the lad in at the pommelling? 'Twould do his heart good to hit at Ned when he's sprawling."

"Think'st thou so, Wat Cawdrey?" Hamnet cried, contemptuously. "Marry, I give Heaven thanks that no two persons in this world be alike. I'd not hit my greatest foe under another man's arm—I be not such an arrant coward as that."

"An thou talk'st o' cowards," the other spluttered.

"Peace, peace," Diccon interposed. "What! shall there be falling out betwixt sworn brothers? Take hands, take hands, I say. So! Now thou may'st get thee to thy home, boy, and fail na to meet me to-morrow at cock-shut time at the elm at the Dove-house Close. And for a nay-word—H'm! let's see. What the dickens shall it be? By the mass, I have it—it shall be 'London and father!' Dost hear, little one? Say it after me."

Hamnet raised his head and looked straight

into the evil face before him, his own pure, little face flushed but resolute with a strange, fixed expression.

"London," he said, bravely, "London and—and father! I'll not forget."

CHAPTER XII

A hundred thousand welcomes! I could weep
And I could laugh, I am light and heavy. Welcome!

CORIOLANUS.

Wherever the bright sun of heaven shall shine,
His honour and the greatness of his name
Shall be.

HENRY VIII.

MASTER WILL SHAKESPEARE, turning into Henley Street from the Swan, where he had left his fellow-travellers, felt a great thrill of satisfaction as he caught the first glimpse of the home of his birth set in its fair garden. He took off his velvet bonnet with its curling feather, and waved it as gayly as any boy let out for a half-holiday waves his cap in mid-air, while the shout that issued from his happy throat was a right goodly imitation, surely, of the shouts of his youth. If he had known a bitter pang of disappointment because no slender, little figure waited by the road-side as he came riding over familiar ground and searched each bush and tree with eager eyes, expecting to hear the glad cry 'Father!' at every moment, that disappointment

was speedily swallowed up in the delight of seeing near at hand the sight his heart most longed for.

They were all there by the house-door, or darting out into the lane—his father, mother, wife, daughters, and the little lad—him the ardent glance sought out first and last. Not ill, now God be praised! as he had almost feared when he passed along the home stretch and no laughing challenge bade him stay his horse. Not ill—and yet the anxious eyes saw an indescribable difference in the upraised face, which was too faint to be called a change, and which those about the boy had failed to perceive. On the moment it cast a shadow upon the man's heart, darkening it, even as the sudden shifting of a cloud across the sun will chase the warmth and brightness from the landscape.

He gave a little shiver, as if some coming evil had already assumed tangible shape. The feeling which had dominated his breast for so long filled him with a vague apprehension. At any time that which he prized most dear might be swept from him. The very sense of possession was full of a pathos too deep for words. To have, to hold—nay, what availed his feeble strength? The thought was 'as a death, which cannot chose but weep to have that which it fears to lose.' Was it only in his fancy, he asked

himself, that the delicate face had grown thinner and paler?

"Art not well, sweet heart?" he demanded, as he leaped to the ground and caught the lad in his arms, holding him at a little distance and scanning his features uneasily.

"La, Will," Mistress Anne Shakespeare laughed, "I do protest thou art as full o' whimseys as an old goody. Methinks the child is in fair health; he's grown taller sith thou wert here, and belike he's summat slimmer; but, go to! he hath a parlous appetite, and that I know full well. Speak up, sirrah; thou art not sick?"

"Not so, dear Mother; naught aileth me."

"Ay, forsooth, the lad is right," Mistress Mary Shakespeare said, in her reassuring way; "'tis only thy fancy, sweet son — and thy fear," she added, in a lower tone, with a little catch in her breath like a sob; "nay, I see with thine eyes sometimes, and I understand. But 'tis pure fancy now," she continued, briskly, and her voice, even in its gentleness, made one think of the stirring of the breeze which dispels the clouds and drives them relentlessly across the sky to leave the blue unmarred. "And Nan's not wrong about the appetite neither; there's scant falling off there. I do bethink me, an he seemeth pale to thee, that it is for some cause which is not far to seek. The lad's slumbers have been broke o'

"Art not well, sweet heart?" he demanded.

late. Am I not right, boy? Thou need'st not to hang thy head, dear wag; I know the trick thou hast o' dreaming wi' open eyes. I know the little sums thou hast made on everything. Nay, the shopmen o' Middle Row keep not fairer tallies o' their sales than thou hast kept o' thy hours, and thy minutes even, sith ever thou heard'st that someone was coming home from London town."

"Ha, ha, sweet Mother; is that the cause? I' faith, thou readest child-nature better than do the rest of us all put together. Well, lad, an thou knew'st so exactly when I should come, why didst not meet me beyond the bridge?"

Father and son had fallen a trifle behind the others, and at the question the little fellow raised his tortured eyes to the man's clear gaze.

"I could not come," he answered, simply; "I could not."

"So," Will Shakespeare said, softly, with something like pity in his tones; for though he wist not what the trouble was, yet was he certain that it lay heavy on the small heart, and he longed to lift away the burden and make all bright again—"so, then thou must have had a strong reason to stay thy feet that have ever run to meet me—a strong reason."

He waited a moment for the boy to speak, casting a swift, downward look at the lowered face

and the small brown hand that passed restlessly to and fro on Silver's head.

A touch of bitterness stole over the man at the withholding of the childish confidence, and not for the first time did he long to bear the lad away and keep him always by his side, where he might share his innermost thoughts, and watch the unfolding of his nature. He had dreaded that, living, as he was obliged to, the greater portion of his time apart from his family, he would grow to be regarded by the little ones in the light of a stranger. And when he said 'little ones,' though his daughters were dear to him, he knew intuitively that he meant the lad in whom all his brightest hopes were centred. Had his fear in a degree come true? Was this strange diffidence on the part of the boy whose thoughts had ever been as open as the day just a beginning of the cooling of his love? The questions were full of torment to the man's mind. He put them aside hastily, stung suddenly into the realization, by the greatness of his own affection, that the boy's love was no whit less deep than his, and could not fail him. He was still smarting from the sense of disappointment that had clouded his home-coming, and prone to magnify small causes into thrice their size. That was all. He was as foolish as any girl!

"An thou knew'st how I longed for thee, in

very truth, thou wouldst have made shift to meet me," he said, with his tender smile, unconsciously planting a deeper barb in the little heart, which was almost bursting with the constant struggle between its love and its unworthiness. "But there! I'll upbraid thee no more. Thou'lt never make me look in vain again—wilt thou, dear boy?"

"Nay, never again"—the small hand ceased stroking the dog, and clasped its mate tightly over the man's arm—"never again."

"A promise, and ratified thus! There's small danger o' thy breaking it. When next I come from London thou'lt be on the lookout, surely."

"Marry, yea, though I'll not tell thee where—'twould spoil half the surprise."

"That would it; but surprise me no more surprises o' this morning's sort. Ha! Ned, is't thou? Why, lad, thou look'st bravely—bravely."

Hamnet fell back as the brothers embraced, the light in Ned's eyes darkening the sudden happiness in his own. Was it always to be like this? Was Ned always to come between? For a short time he had been able to put his uncle from his thoughts, but only for a short time. The load of guilt in the small heart which had made it impossible for the child to meet his father, pressed more heavily than before. Had it not been punishment enough, he asked himself, to relinquish

that dear pleasure, that in these first moments of a nearer drawing together he should be spared the pain of Ned's coming to thrust them wide apart?

A hot flame leaped in the boy's breast, stirring the dormant anger there into fresh life. His rage toward Ned had died down in a degree, and in its stead he had found himself longing to retract his oath. What real reason had he, aside from his bitter jealousy and those cruel reports Diccon had spread, to thwart his uncle and to betray him? Silver had long since granted forgiveness—a forgiveness which Hamnet, in his turn, was bound to accord when that night, as he hastened home from Welcombe Hill, Ned had overtaken him, and had made amends for his ill-doing of the earlier day.

It was Ned, too, who had bound up Cato's wounds with dexterous fingers, and had given him a new back; even in Hamnet's half-grudging thanks there had been a note of admiration for the skilful work the amateur surgeon had accomplished. Still, the promise, which was like a chain about him, kept him from any real friendship with his uncle, and when he found himself chafing against its bounds he nursed his evil feelings back to life by the repetition of Diccon's phrases and his vague, intolerable hints.

Will Shakespeare turned suddenly from his brother's eager questions and looked around like

one missing his chiefest good. A single glance at Hamnet's moody face was in itself a revelation to the man's mind, and a thrill of joy warmed his heart at the simple solution of the difficulty before him, though with its coming he felt a stab of distress at the thought of the pain the child was suffering. He put out a fond hand.

"Why didst leave me?" he asked; "know'st thou not that thy place is always here?"

He drew the boy's head against his breast as he spoke, and patted his cheek tenderly.

"By my troth, thou hast grown most marvellous," he cried; "nay, Ned, thou wilt have but a short deputyship, I'm thinking—the true prince will not tarry past his due time."

Ned laughed good-humouredly.

"Marry, that will he not," he said, "and glad I'll be, i' faith, heartily, when he cometh into his own, sith I know that that day is so dear to thy thought."

Hamnet clung closer to his father, his eyes closed to keep back the stinging tears. How dared Ned speak so fair, he asked himself angrily—how dared he, when he had said those other things? Oh! if it were only possible to tear the mask from his hateful, smiling face and expose him truly as he was.

During the next few days the subtle change which had come over the child was ever present

to the anxious parent, who, from the first moment of their reunion, had noticed its existence. It was not so much that the little lad looked ill, though there was a trace of languor discernible in his appearance, and his flushed cheeks and over-bright eyes were in some measure indicative of the excitement under which he was labouring, but in other way the observant eyes were conscious of an alteration. There was a restlessness about the boy that was far from natural; he seemed to be living in a continual state of repression. He was full, too, of apprehension, and started like a timid girl at the least sound—the tapping of a branch at the window, or a low whistle, would cause him manifest uneasiness—and even his merriment had lost much of its usual ring. To his elders he maintained his customary courtesy, and his sisters, in his occasional fits of boisterousness, missed no whit of his generally high spirits; only the father, looking on with the growing pain at his heart, saw that something was sadly amiss. That it was connected with Edmund's going he was well aware, and he waited for some childish outburst of envy to clear away the surcharged feelings.

But Hamnet's conduct toward his uncle was full of contradictions, as his father was not slow to recognize. It was made up largely of a regret that was something more than the regret occa-

sioned by the prospect of absence, and the boy bore himself at the same time in an attitude of mingled resentment and affection. Often he would cast glances of anger and hatred at Ned's unconscious figure, which would be succeeded anon by looks so full of pain and sorrow as to sadden the watcher indescribably.

The man was never one to disparage a child's trouble—it was as keen and big to the little mind as it would have been to his larger one; keener and bigger, in sooth, for childhood has no philosophy whereby to dispel the darkness and show the way to a better adjustment of the burden Fate assigns, since borne it must be. He would have helped his boy in this present instance with his maturer wisdom, but he had too much respect for the sacredness of a child's feelings to strip them of their flimsy covering and make light of them in careless, grown-up wise. He would view their nakedness only at his son's bidding and then he would wrap them close in the mantle of his love —then, and not till then. Meanwhile, by a thousand indirect ways, he sought to make it easy for the little lad to approach him with his perplexity, and still the boy held aloof, not only spiritually but physically.

Hamnet, on his part, realized speedily that the nearness of the old times was something that was not to be the centre and joy of this particular

visit. Another season, when he was more worthy, he told himself, he might linger by his father's side — now he dared not! Now he was almost glad to share that dear companionship with the others; to go without those long, delightful talks of which he had dreamed for months. Nor was it only the thought of his unworthiness that whipped him from his father's society and made him an outsider. He was tormented by the constant fear that in some way he might betray his trust. He had boasted that no Shakespeare had ever held his word lightly, and the dread that now encompassed him was that by some chance he might imperil the whiteness of the name his father bore. Come what come might, he must be true to Diccon's hideous plan, since his oath was given. There was no alternative. So the little lad, with his vague notions of honour, argued, and so he fought out his battles unaided, while the tiny mist of misunderstanding rolled like a soft, impenetrable curtain between his father and himself.

It was a slight matter, but a pebble in one's shoe will lame one as surely as a larger stone, and matters do not have to be of great import to give rise to misconceptions and consequent heartaches. Something huge and tangible may be overthrown with ease, when one is braced for the act, and leave a pleasant sense of exhilaration behind, but

those little insidious things—too small almost for notice, and which yet send their roots into the very depths of one's being—are wellnigh invincible.

The child's reserve in this respect was like a constant pricking in Will Shakespeare's side. It implied more—much more—than the mere withholding of his confidence. Whatever he had hitherto known or thought had always been revealed, and, in the crucible of the man's great love, had been purified of all dross by an alchemy which, to the boy's thinking, was almost divine. But here was a trouble, which, for some reason, was not to be so dealt with. What aid the little lad received was to come from himself, or from some outsider, who, for the time being, stood nearer than his father.

Will Shakespeare, with a touch of jealousy in his breast, cast about him to discover who had usurped his place. His quest was unavailing. There was no one who stood nearer, seemingly, nor did he miss aught from the child's adoring love. It was as patent to all as the sun in the heavens. It even appeared to have increased in volume, if that could be, though it possessed a new quality, half of humility, half of sorrow. There was often a questioning, pathetic look in the wide-set hazel eyes as they were turned upon the father's face—a dumb, grieved longing that found

its counterpart in Silver's glance at times—which hurt the recipient as the keen thrust of a knife would have done. The frequent silences, too, which fell upon the merry tongue, and the wild bursts of extravagant mirth which succeeded them, were so unusual as to confirm the man's first belief in the lad's illness. And that subtle fear which had made the precariousness of life so insistent to him, thrilled him again and again.

These, however, were the only shadows to cloud the brief home-stay. There was much of pleasantness besides—gay talks with relatives and friends, walks a-field with a tail of loving, thronging children, delicious dreamings in the long afterglow, when the hush of night was creeping up over the peaceful land, lingerings by the tranquil river, with the children again—the little lad nearest of all leaning against his shoulder, and no thought of estrangement between their happy hearts.

It was a busy season, too, and one full of deep satisfaction to gentle Will Shakespeare, whose thrift and industry had been mainly instrumental in bringing about its material advantages. There was much talk between the elders of the application which had just gone up to the Heralds' College for a grant of coat-armour, whereby John Shakespeare, then a yeoman, might attain the recognized position of a gentleman, and so enable

his son, and his son's son after him, to take their places among the proudest of the country-side.

The old man, steeped in the pathetic silence of age, grew garrulous once more. The possibility of this honour coming at the end of a career wherein he had known much of the adverse turnings of Fortune's wheel let loose the flood-gates of his speech, and he lived over the days when he had enjoyed high places in the town's gift, and had made his first application to the Heralds for arms, a proceeding which his haughty neighbour at Charlecote had caused to be put one side. To no one did he open his heart more unreservedly than to his eldest son, who listened by the hour to the accounts of the sights the old man had seen, nor sought to belittle them by the wideness of his own experience. He was not without a feeling of pride himself at the realization of what was no mere empty honour to him—the making fairer of the name he loved!

It was at this time, too, that he took the whole family into his confidence, and told them in part of his dream of buying the 'Great House' in Chapel Lane, and how, now that it was possible for him to accomplish his desire, he had already taken steps toward the purchase. A little cloud, for one moment, overspread Mistress Mary Shakespeare's brow; then her soft tones mingled in the general chorus of surprise and joy. She was

proud and thankful and—yes, happy—even while the knowledge of what her own loss would be pressed heavily upon her.

"The 'Great House' is not so far away," she said, musingly, when the others had done speaking, and unconsciously she lifted the veil from her thoughts.

"Not 'Great House' to thee, sweet Mother," Will Shakespeare cried, hastily; "I'll not have it so. 'Tis but another home, and so thou must call it, where the doors will be ever set wide for thee and thine, and no guest more honoured than thou —nay, not even a queen, an she could stay beneath my poor roof."

Hamnet jumped up from the settle, where he had been lounging by his father, and ran over to where the old woman sat, with her tender eyes smiling bravely at them all. He put his cheek against hers, in the pretty way he had.

"Dear Grandam," he said, "'tis truly hard by; Chapel Lane is but a step away. Now, in good sooth, I mislike the name o' 'Great House,' too, except to say it over to the boys, and then it hath a fair sound—a monstrous fair sound. But 'twill not be dearer than this old place; no new place could be that, could it, Father?"

"Nay, little lad, not dearer, and thou hast given it a name likelier to my fancy. An my dealings with Master Underhill fall not through—and I

trow they will not — I'll call the house 'New Place,' e'en as thou hast said, so that it will remember me o' this old house and all the happy days I've known herein. And now, I do bethink me, Sir Hugh so called it before ever we were born, and belike for the same reason—thinking o' his former home——"

"Well said, Will, well said," his father interposed, "and 'New Place' is a good phrase, but methinks 'Great House' is still the better, and it hath been called thus always within my memory. I'd not meddle wi' the town's titles an I were i' thy shoes. How now, wife, is not William Shakespeare, o' Great House, Stratford, i' the County o' Warwick, Gentleman, a marvellous fine mouthful? 'Tis excellent, i' faith, very singular good."

But Will Shakespeare only laughed for answer, and his glance sought out his mother's face, while a swift look of understanding passed between the two, and then the woman knew that the little lad's words would stand for all time.

CHAPTER XIII

I have heard of the lady, and good words went with her name.
MEASURE FOR MEASURE.

What we have we prize not to the worth
Whiles we enjoy it; but being lack'd and lost,
Why, then we rack the value, then we find
The virtue that possession would not show us
Whiles it was ours.
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

"WHERE is Hamnet? Hillo, ho, ho, boy!"

"He's not within, Will, nor hath not been this hour gone."

"Hast sent him on any errand, then? Marry, I spoke a holiday for the lad this morn o' purpose to keep him by me, and I've scarce laid eyes on him."

"That hath not been his fault," Mistress Anne retorted with a laugh, as she set a stitch in her work and poised her head on one side, the better to regard it. "He hath been closer to thee than thy shadow sith cockcrow until a while back. But there hath been old work to-day with all the neighbours coming in for a word wi' thee. As 'tis, my mother is e'en gone off sore vexed, for

that thou wert so taken up wi' Cousin Greene at the last, and had no talk wi' her. Thou'rt in her ill books now in very truth."

"Say'st thou so? Then thou must e'en make peace betwixt us, sweet chuck; and for the better furthering o' that purpose, devise something for me to fetch her when next I come hither."

"La, now, I do protest—you men e'en think the surest way to win a woman's heart is by gauds."

"Nay, Nan, we don't think—perdy! we know. I'll wager this chain o' mine against a skein o' Coventry blue that thy good mother's anger will melt away like the snow in April at the first glimpse o' a trinket from London. But what keepeth the boy?"

"By my troth, I wot not; he'll be here anon. Verily, thou'rt as impatient as any youth waiting for his love."

"I' faith, 'tis so," the man returned, with a hearty laugh; "but methinks 'tis not like the little lad to leave me the last day o' my stay. I marvel, now—" He broke off hastily, and went to the door, stepping out under the pent-house and searching far and near with his eagle glance.

At sight of him, Judith, who was standing in the lane with some other children, darted half shyly in his direction. He held out his hand, with his sunny smile.

"Well, little wench," he cried, as he clasped her chubby fingers with a fond pressure, "thou'rt ready, and so am I; but where is that laggard Hamnet—hast seen him?"

"He was even here, sweet Father, when Cousin Greene was within wi' thee, for he did us some handsprings, like the Jack-Pudding on May day; but a big boy came by and called him aside. 'Twas Wat Cawdrey—a great lout o' a fellow—one I could never away with. Nay, I heard not what they said, they spoke so low; only I could see that Hamnet was e'en loath to do Wat's will. But, there! thou knowest how he cannot bear to ill-convenience anyone, so at the last he called out that he must be off for a time, and he said we must not tarry here for him—he'd overtake us or meet us at Cross-on-the-Hill."

"So," Will Shakespeare laughed, shortly, "the king hath had his day. What think'st thou?"

"Nay," stammered the little maid, "I wot not what those words mean. Methought there was no king, but that the Queen did queen it in 's stead."

"Why, right; thou'rt right, sweet duck, there is no king. 'Twas only I that had forgot."

He looked down into the small, wondering face, a tender smile growing in his eyes.

"I' faith, bird," he went on, "thou'rt slow o' comprehension; but, by the mass, 'tis better so—belike, thou'lt be saved many a heartache."

"I cannot tell," Judith faltered; "but I would not have the heartache—nor any ache, in good sooth—though my Grandam Hathaway saith there be cures for all troubles. She knoweth many goodly simples, and she hath a cramp-ring, besides; so, an my heart acheth, I'll away to her. If ever thine dost ache, I'll get her to make it right for thee. Is't true, as Susanna saith, sweet Father, that the great people at Court take doses o' gold and pearls, to make their bodies well withal?"

"Ay, that they do, little one. Susanna hath a sprack memory for what I say. Pulverized pearls, and powdered diamonds, and salt o' gold, they be considered great 'cure-alls' by people o' quality—and there's coral, too, which some esteem the most potent o' all. But the Queen, herself, is chary o' physic-taking; and well she may be, when such stuffs are prescribed. Nature is our best doctor."

"The Queen is not over-brave," Judith hastened to say, so preoccupied in her own delight at talking that she did not heed the expression of pain on her father's face. "Thou know'st the tale o' her toothache? What! thou shak'st thy head? La, now, I do protest I wish Hamnet were by—he's such a master hand at telling o' stories. But, an thou know'st it not, and would hear it, I'll e'en do my best.

"Why once, ever so many years agone, the Queen had a grievous pain in her tooth so that she could get no sleep by night nor day, and all her great men were in a sore coil knowing not what to do to ease her o' it. And some folks did say—" Judith lowered her voice from the high pitch it had assumed in her excitement and looked cautiously around—"some folks did say she was suffering from black magic the wicked had used against her. Then the doctors quarrelled among themselves so that her lords were fain to send for an outlandish wise-man who had ever great skill in curing the toothache. But when he came from over-seas they would not let him in to see her Majesty, for that they feared he was a papist or a Jew. So he e'en writ out a letter all in Latin and he said he was unworthy to come after such wonderful doctors, still in his humble mind the tooth were best out—'twas the quickest way o' o'ercoming the ill.

"And the Queen, marry, would hear no word o' it, whereat all her great men got them down on their knees and beseeched her, but she'd not hearken to their prayers. Though the tooth did pain her, she wanted not to have it go, and besides, thou know'st, she was frightened o' the pulling, ay, truly, that she was! Then up rose an old man—I wot not his name—and said the pulling would not hurt much, 'twould soon be over.

And, quoth he: 'I have not many teeth left, but your Majesty shall see how easy 'tis after all to let one go.' Whereupon did he ope his mouth wide and he bade the master surgeon to pull wi' all his might. And so he did, and the old man never even said 'boo!' when the tooth came forth. Then the Queen took heart, and she e'en had her tooth out on the spot." Judith ended her recital with a long sigh.

"That's all there is to the tale, good Father," she said, after a moment, "every word, but I wish I knew whether her Majesty cried or no. Dost think she did?"

"Marry, sweetheart, I doubt it not. She hath lusty lungs, and belike she boxed the master surgeon's ears for his pains and her own."

"I am glad to hear thee say that, for Susanna will not have it that the Queen uttered a sound, and Hamnet saith, an she did, 'twas no more than the veriest squeak, for she'd not be outdone in bravery by one o' her own Court. But I feel sure she took on most mightily. Poor Madam Queen! An the great Sir cried not for the hurt o' his tooth, 'twould not make the parting wi' her own any easier to bear, and so I tell them."

"Thou'rt wise after thine own fashion," laughed the man, pulling the child's ear gently, "as the others are after theirs. I' faith, when all's said and done, we do but suffer our own pain, each man for

himself, and how we bear it is but a question o' our natures. And which is best—who shall say—Sue's way, Hamnet's way, thine, mine, or the Queen's? Though I cry her Majesty's pardon for naming o' her last. Now Heaven send thee much happiness, little maid, and scant cause for tears, say I! Prithee, no more prattling, though thou hast diverted me vastly, and I give thee thanks, but get thee in and tell thy mother and grandmother to lay aside their stitchery. They must e'en play the idle housewives with us this afternoon. Come, hasten, hasten, we'll away to Cross-on-the-Hill. I warrant me, the lad will be there before us."

Meanwhile Hamnet was crouched in a low dark room of an ill-built hovel in Sheep Street, listening dispiritedly to the wrangling of his two fellow-conspirators, and Silver who was not granted admittance by Diccon, lay without the door waiting impatiently for his master's coming. It seemed an eternity of time to both boy and dog before they were together once more and were speeding forth across the fields and by divers short cuts to the rendezvous on the hill. The lad's face was flushed and his breath came in hurried gasps. If he should be too late! A mist danced before his eyes at the mere thought, and he stumbled clumsily in his haste. This afternoon that had meant so much to him, when every golden moment should have been spent at his

father's side, was slipping by so fast. There was no way to hold it back, no way to live it over! The very last afternoon!

In a lightning's flash he reviewed the happenings of the holiday his father had obtained for him. There was the walk in the early morning to the 'Great House'—'New Place,' the little lad corrected himself quickly—just the two of them going hand in hand along the streets where, on every side, the folk stepped forward with some word of greeting, and then there was the visit to the house itself. He remembered well how he had strutted about the garden while his father and Master Underhill were deep in talk and had cast proud glances, ever and anon, at the school opposite to see if any of the boys were looking in wonderment at his being there. Then home again to the eleven-o'clock dinner, and after that no peace at all with father, with all the visitors coming in.

Well 'twas passing pleasant to stand by and listen to the talk, now merry, now wise. Talk of the Queen, mark you! and the expedition to Cadiz, and my Lord Essex—he that was so young and bold—and Sir Walter Raleigh, too, and his vessel the Warspite and how they'd be avenged on the Spanishers for all our men had suffered at their hands. And talk of the plays and players, and bear-baitings—a sport the Queen loved mightily—I' faith, 'twas monstrous divert-

ing to hear it all and then, look you! Cousin Greene must e'en fall to talking of cattle and such like, so that any sensible lad would be driven forth to where the girls and their gossips were playing in the garden. Well! 'twas pleasant, too, there for a while, until——

Hamnet broke off in his thoughts with a shudder. In his ears he could still hear that low whistle—two long, shrill notes, and then a pause while one could count three, then the notes again followed by a cuckoo's call. He had waited all Saturday for that signal, listening, listening, but it had not come to mar the day. Then Sunday, from the earliest time of waking until long after the house was quiet for the night, he had waited, fearing—hoping as the hours went by—and fearing again, and still there was no sign; until at last he had cheated himself into the belief that after all Ned was not to be punished, that that interview on Welcombe Hill was some hideous dream which had affrighted him. Monday a holiday—Monday his father's last day at home—Chapel Lane in the morning, and the prospect of that delicious stroll in the afternoon, through the meadows and woods to the hill where, in his youth, Will Shakespeare had been wont to meet Anne Hathaway, and where, ever since, during the succeeding years on each home visit, there was constant pilgrimage made to the spot.

And it was afternoon and they had all set forth, a glad, frolicsome train, only he, Hamnet, was not one of the number. Something like a spasm in the lad's throat choked him, and as he put up his hand to wrench the band of his shirt aside, a little, crackling sound followed the motion. It was very faint, and yet on the moment it was like thunder in the boy's ears and seemed to cast a leaden weight upon the flying feet so that they dragged painfully. How could he go on? How could he go into his father's presence when in his bosom he carried that bit of paper which would snuff out Ned's hopes?

He could not go forward. He would creep away and wait in hiding through the long, long hours of the night past the sunrise, past the time of father's going and then crawl home. But Ned would be safe—safe on the London road at father's side journeying toward his heart's desire.

Hamnet paused irresolute and pressed his aching temples with his trembling hands. Was that plan best? Would it do? He cared not if Diccon Hobday and Wat Cawdrey wreaked their vengeance on him; that he would as lief meet, he could stand a threshing as well as the next one and make no cry so long as Ned was safe and father's plans unbroke. Father's plans! Down came the hands and a blinding rush of tears

blurred everything. Father's plans—Why! he—Hamnet—was part of those plans, this very afternoon's pleasure was devised chiefest for his sake.

Despite the cruel insinuations Diccon had poured forth, the lad's loyal faith in his father had not been shaken for an instant. Ned must have said those ill things, since Diccon, who loved the truth, maintained he had and seemed sore distressed in the repetition, but that they had originated with his father was a possibility that Hamnet would not even admit into his thoughts. Ned alone was responsible for them.

With a contrary rush of feeling the little lad experienced a thrill of gladness at the thought of the punishment which was so shortly to be meted out to his uncle, but the pleasure was as fleeting as a bubble's beauty. 'Twas gone in an instant. And again that project of hiding knocked for admittance at his mind. 'Twould be passing easy, he argued, he knew so many excellent places.

His heart suddenly rose and confronted his specious reasoning. And what of father? What of the worry and sadness he would know waiting for him—Hamnet—to come home, waiting, waiting—What of the fear that would grow as the time slipped by? The river—highwaymen—what other horrors? The whole town would be aroused, neighbours and the watch going forth to beat up the country-side for Will Shakespeare's

little lad. Who else would suffer through those tedious-slow night hours? Mother, gran, Sue, Judith, Ned, grandfather—the list stretched out indefinitely. And if they came not upon his hiding-place, would father go off in the morning back over the road to London, or would he stay and search and search? There was his word to keep and important business calling him on the one hand, and there was the finding of his little lad on the other. And which would be the weightiest?

The small heart beneath that folded treacherous paper leaped quickly. No need to even ask the question. There would be no thought of business, or of honour even, on the man's part at such a time. And up in London town his brother players would say, chiding the impatient, 'Tis not like sweet Will Shakespeare, he hath never broke his word before, belike some evil chance hath fallen upon him.'

Hamnet's face stiffened with a sudden resolve. He must go forward. Nothing must come in the way of his father's honour or his happiness. Only that much was clear to the child's troubled mind—that and the imperative duty which his own evil spirit had lain upon him and from which there was no relief. He must travel over every foot of the road to the fulfilling of his vengeance, no matter now what it cost him of pain or regret, but in

carrying it out he had no right to cloud the last few hours of his father's stay. He had missed so much happiness, himself, from the short visit, that he wondered, as he hastened on, if his father had known in his turn any falling off in the usual cheer. There had been the same walks, the same pleasures, but with a difference. Between the two, ever growing higher, was the secret in the child's breast which poisoned all his time and made the nights, as he lay sleepless in the attic, interminable in their going, and the days, with their haunting dread, dark though the sun shone its brightest.

And now the visit was almost over, and after it had come to an end what would happen? Hamnet had asked himself that question with a sickening iteration. Ned's fury when he should learn what part his nephew had played in frustrating his designs would be nothing, less than nothing, to bear. There was something else that thrilled the little lad with a feeling worse than the fear of any physical hurt. The thought not only of his father's displeasure, but of his sorrow. How would he look? What would he say when everything should be made known? For it must be made known if ever between them there would be the old tender relationship again. Wouldn't something of its sunniness be lost forever? Could it ever be just the same again?

Over and over, through the night watches, those thoughts had come to the child while the clock in the living-room below-stairs had sounded like a human voice, saying monotonously: 'Never again! Never again!' The words had crept into the boy's mind and, as he ran along, he repeated them with a dull persistence, at first unconsciously and later with a growing consciousness: 'Never again! Never again!' Suddenly the sound of his voice in that indistinct murmur aroused him. With a rush their meaning was clear to him.

Well! if 't was to be 'never again' this hour at least was his and he would make it fair while it lasted. There should be no thought of what must happen after curfew. He'd not think of that, he'd think of other things—of—of— Why, there was that anthem he had sung with the boys at Trinity o' Sunday. How pleased and proud father had looked as he listened from his place, his eyes just watching one small lad who had led the others, singing loud and clear the words of their favourite psalm:

"'He shall feed me in a green pasture and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.'"

CHAPTER XIV

Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forward do contend.

SONNET LX.

Heaven give you many, many merry days!

MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR.

WILL SHAKESPEARE, looking off at the view he loved, missed something from its usual beauty. It was not that the meadows were less fair, though in truth they had lost a little of the fresh greenness of the spring and were no longer starred with tall moon-daisies, but what summer had deprived with one hand she had recompensed bountifully with the other, and in the glow of rich maturity the delicious promise of blossoming-time was almost forgotten. It was not that the Avon, passing through the broad valley with the fields rising on both sides in softly swelling undulations, had grown turbid, it still curved along, a gleaming coil of silver, like some wondrous chain binding the emerald land.

It was not that Stratford was less dear to the

eyes that had grown accustomed to the sight of palaces and lofty cathedrals, or less lovely for that matter. It was not that the flowers at his feet — 'the flowers of middle summer' — that raised their faces to catch his glance, were not as sweet as those of an earlier day, nor that the sky-lark, the blackbird, and the thrush had departed from the spot which, according to his fancy, they frequented longer than any other of the neighbouring localities. There was an occasional shy burst of song from their little feathered throats as they flew past, frightened from their haunts by the gay band of people who had invaded their solitude with laughter and pastimes. The place was still as fair as he had known it in those other times when, with a heart beating high with love, he had hastened thither to meet the Shottery lass.

It was as pleasing to the eye, and yet a vague cloud had robbed the scene of much of its brightness. He stood a trifle apart from the others, resting after a game of hoodman-blind, and looking off at the way curving along from Stratford. Suddenly the mist cleared and never was the land lovelier, nor the sky fairer; never did the river flash more radiantly, nor the birds' song sound sweeter—for there was the little lad with Silver at his side coming—coming along.

Will Shakespeare turned with a quick exclamation and hurried toward the advancing figures.

"Marry, my pretty knave," he said, with a tinge of impatience in his playful voice, "thou art eaten up wi' carking cares. Could'st not have kept this afternoon free for me—my last afternoon, too?"

"Nay, an I could I would not have budged from thy side," the boy answered, catching the extended hand in both of his; "and that thou know'st full well, I warrant. I meant not to stay so long—but 'twas an old promise and I could not break it."

"I' faith I should have scorned to have thee treat thine honour so lightly. I'd liefer thou 'dst stayed the whole day from me—cruel as that would have seemed—than have had thee depart so much as an hair's-breadth from thy given word."

Hamnet's grasp loosened and his face twitched. After a moment he raised his eyes to his father's with a world of entreaty in his glance, which for once went unnoticed.

"But a boy's word," he faltered, "a boy's word now, is no such great matter. 'Tis not o' so much import as a man's."

"Ay, verily it is. There be no degrees in honour—it knoweth no question o' age. A promise, sweet, an thou giv'st it, or I give it, is still a promise—something we both must keep, though it cost us dear. Once thou hast pledged thy word in good faith to another, so it must stand—

the Queen's oath is not stronger. Let it never be said o' my little lad that he is a promise-breaker. Come, I forgive thee thine absence sith thou wert but doing o' thy bounden duty. The afternoon hath been hardest to thee, I trow, but past cure is still past care—thou hast missed rare sport."

Hamnet stood pondering for a minute. How could he ask to be guided aright in this troubled matter when he had bound himself to secrecy? He knew now, in part, what his father thought of the sacredness of a promise—what a boy's word was worth to him. And that should be sufficient guide for his own conduct. Meanwhile this was his hour—the time that would never come again! He darted forward with a loud cry, tugging at the man's hand, and dragging him a laughing prisoner into the gay group where were assembled Mistress Mary and Mistress Anne Shakespeare, Sue and Judith with their cousin Ursula, and pretty Katharine Rogers. Ned, as they came up, was adjusting a plank across a tree-stump, while little Humphrey Shakespeare, with the prospect of 'riding the wild mare' in company with his playmate Tom Quiney, stood at one side shrieking out directions in shrill excitement, and Tom Combe alternately lent a helping hand or fanned his heated face with his cap.

"Such fine doings," Judith said, plucking at her brother's sleeve as he passed; "methought thou wouldst lose them all. Prythee, sweet Father, wilt play at barley-break, now Hamnet's here?"

"Ay, that I will, or prisoners' base, 'More sacks to the mill,' or whate'er thou devisest."

"Then barley-break let it be," Ned cried, having set the two little lads to riding up and down; "we be over many, 'tis true, but we can e'en take turns. Come, let's draw cuts."

So the young folk, with William Shakespeare in their midst as gay as the gayest, played at the old sport, while Mistress Mary and her daughter-in-law sat beneath a tree looking on with happy eyes. And there, after the pastime was ended, the others came to rest themselves with a game of 'Spanish merchant' which, as everyone doth know, was made by her Majesty, the Queen, for my Lord Burleigh's children. A monstrous diverting game surely, and an easy, if one would only remember to offer for sale what he hath his hand upon. But though Master Will Shakespeare had been the first to bring the sport into Stratford, he was ever forgetting its rules, so that he forfeited much, yet right bravely did he redeem all the fines. There was no undertaking so hard that he was not willing to try to compass it and was no whit disturbed by the merriment his efforts evoked.

It coming at last to Judith to set him some task, she was e'en for making him dance, whereupon, knowing how fond she was of footing it, he proposed they should have 'Sellenger's Round,' and before they could say him nay he walked him up to his mother and, with his hand upon his heart, bowed in right courtly fashion and led her forth to her place, saluting her with a kiss. In a twinkling Hamnet had sought out Mistress Anne Shakespeare, while the others paired off as quickly. Then the couples all joined hands and went round twice and back again and in and out with a succession of figures to vary the circular movement, and because there were no fiddlers present they all did sing, 'The Beginning of the World,' which is a sweet and gracious tune, and the one always associated with that dance. When it was over, each must confess that 'twas the best sport that had yet been devised, and so with courtesies and kisses they took leave of their partners.

And then, because the day was waning and the little sadness that is ever lurking in the air at such times had crept over them — only not unpleasantly—the gay shouts and laughter subsided and in their stead someone started a song. 'Twas Mistress Anne Shakespeare in a voice as true and sweet as the skylark's, and as it rose and fell in the strains of the melody, each one listening

knew that this was best after all; the music so suited the golden peace about them. At her will they all joined in with the burden, and after that they sang some simple old madrigals and then 'Joan, come Kiss me Now,' one of the most favourite airs in the Queen's virginal book, and rightly so, for 'twas as sweet a little tune as ever was thought on and full of tenderness. And anon followed 'Joan's Placket' and 'Green Sleeves' for Ned's sake, and 'Constant Susanna,' just to tease Sue, and many another ballad, while to please the little lads—Tom Quiney and Humphrey—there was King Harry's hunting-song, the one that goes:

'Blow thy horn, hunter,
Blow thy horn on high;
In yonder wood there lieth a doe
In faith she will not die.
Then blow thy horn, hunter,
Then blow thy horn, hunter,
Then blow thy horn, jolly hunter.'

At its close, when they all paused out of breath, laughing and wondering what they should sing next, young Mistress Kate—with a sly look at Master William Shakespeare—started a song that began in this wise: 'You spotted snakes, with double tongue,' and when she had finished the verse they all, with one exception, took up the chorus:

'Philomel, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby;
Never harm, nor spell nor charm,
Come our lovely lady nigh;
So, good-night, with lullaby.'

In faith, though it was a passing sweet song, 'twas a luckless one to light upon with a careful grandmother in the company (as anyone should have known!), for as soon as the two verses were sung she needs must get to her feet and counsel them to hasten home. And when they all protested, she stood firm and spoke right roundly, though laughter still lingered in her gentle tones:

"La, Will, la, Nan, I marvel at your waywardness—you be worse than the children. Hark ye, both, an we start not soon 'twill be curfew-time before we know it."

Curfew-time! Hamnet, leaning against his father's shoulder, his face flushed and bright with happiness, started away from the pleasant resting-place, a shudder passing through his frame despite himself, as if some current of air, or some grim sense of approaching ill had caused him to fall a-trembling. His hour of pleasure was over and already the night had come!

That vague shaking and the sudden whiteness of the small countenance were enough to spur

Will Shakespeare from his lazy loitering. In an instant he was on his feet, stung by the fear that the boy had in some way caught a chill and upbraiding himself for his own lack of foresight—the little lad was overheated from dancing when they sat down and—Why less than that had brought about a man's death—Death! why should he ever be harping on that grim theme? He put the thought from him resolutely, and marshalled the young people together more anxiously than even his mother could have done, and drove them laughingly before him, still keeping Hamnet at his side and bearing six-year-old Humphrey aloft on his shoulder.

Down the hill and through the meadows, singing all the way, went the happy band, Ned's voice this time leading the song. And now he sang: 'When icicles hang by the wall'—and even the owls waking from their day-long sleep must have thought that some foolish brother of theirs was abroad before the primrose had died out of the west, so exactly did the youth imitate the merry note—'To-who, tu-whit, to-who.' And anon he sang: 'The ousel cock so black of hue,' and waited for Hamnet to take up the throstle's song with its high, sweet warble, which none could do better than he. The little lad, however, was in no mood for singing, and so the rest, missing his clear notes, must do without him.

Then did Mistress Anne begin 'Who is Silvia?' but none would join in with her; she must sing the song from start to finish by herself, in that pure voice of hers that thrilled them all ineffably, and when she had come to an end a spirit of quietness settled upon them, as if for a time at least, no other music was worthy to be sung.

So they pushed on, saying naught, until Susanna bethought her of some riddles from the book at home, and fell to asking them of everyone. 'Twas passing strange how they would all cry that they could tell, and then, when they were put to it, how they failed. There are only a few things in this world as slippery as a riddle's answer—'tis here, 'tis there—and yet 'tis gone when one seeks to grasp it even for a moment. 'Twas small wonder, then, that Susanna should be called upon to reply to her own questions and should chide them for their lack of wit. Judith, too, was ready with her favourite riddle:

> 'My lover's will
> I am content for to fulfill;
> Within this rime his name is framed,
> Tell me then how he is named?'

Only, having little respect for their abilities, she would not give anyone a chance to speak, but shouted out the solution in a high, triumphant voice:

"His name is William; for in the first line is *Will*, and in the beginning of the second line is *I am*, and then put them both together, and it maketh *William*."

In this way the door of their mirth was once more set ajar and the fun and jollity broke forth again.

All too soon Tom Combe was forced to halt, and after bidding them good-night and taking leave of Master Shakespeare and Ned, who would be away betimes in the morning, he darted off to his home. Katharine Rogers was the next to drop out of the little company as they came to her door in High Street. There was more than a trace of sadness in her glance and in her heart as she bade Ned good-by, and wished him a happy dole in London town, while a note of regret crept into her voice as she said farewell to the man.

He glanced at her upraised, winsome face, grown suddenly grave with the chill of separation.

"Nay, sweet maid," he said, cheerily, "look not so cast down; to be merry best becometh thee. We'll have many goodly walks and talks together yet, I trow."

She clung to his hand tremulously, not trusting herself to speak, then with a quick kiss on Hamnet's cheek she turned away.

A few minutes later Ursula and Humphrey—the latter half asleep—were given over to their parents in Bridge Street, and after that it was but a short distance to the home in Henley Street, and only a step or so beyond to the Quineys' house whither little Tom disappeared in a trice with a noisy whoop at parting. The others lingered in the Shakespeare garden, reluctant to go within-doors. The sun had set, but the sky was radiant with the after-glow; little rosy, golden clouds were floating hither and thither in the soft ether, like the wind-loosened leaves of some wondrous heaven-born flower.

Susanna leaned her cheek against her father's arm.

"It hath been a brave, brave day," she cried, with happy eyes. "Canst tell what is my thought?"

"I pray thee what, my little riddlemonger?"

"I' faith I have had my heart's content," she whispered.

He touched her bright hair tenderly.

"Say'st thou so, sweet rose o' May? Marry, I'll let thee into a secret—bend thine ear close. Methinks I must borrow me thy phrase an I would speak the truth——"

"Hark!" Judith interrupted, "there's that same whistle I heard this noon. I marvel now what it may mean—'tis passing strange."

There was a cessation of the light talk and laughter at the child's request, and on the soft air there was borne to the listening group two long, shrill notes. Judith stood half turned in the direction whence the sound had come, her hand raised, compelling silence. In the short interval of quiet no one spoke, then the notes were repeated, and again there was a short pause which was followed by a cuckoo's call.

"'Tis hard by," Ned said, indifferently; "belike 'tis some signal. That's all, mouse, thou canst read no mystery therein. Some boys are e'en off for a frolic——"

"It seemeth to say, 'Remember—remember—'" Judith persisted.

"Why, that's a signal's meaning any way," Ned laughed; "'tis to stir someone's memory."

CHAPTER XV

O Conspiracy!
Sham'st thou to show thy dangerous brow by night,
When evils are most free? O, then, by day
Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough
To mask thy monstrous visage?

JULIUS CÆSAR.

If hearty sorrow
Be a sufficient ransom for offence,
I tender it here; I do as truly suffer
As e'er I did commit.

TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA.

IT was growing late and the candle was burning low, though Mistress Mary Shakespeare had still a number of last stitches to set in Ned's new turned doublet. Her daughter-in-law, from a near-by seat, watched the slender fingers draw the thread in and out surely, for all that they trembled occasionally, and sought to divert the mother's anxious heart with gentle gossip. The men-folk were away at the Swan, for Will Shakespeare would not hear of going there that last night save in his father's company, and so had over-ruled the old man's opposition and had borne him thither in triumph to meet their friends and neighbours.

Above-stairs the little girls were fast asleep in their room, and in the loft over their heads Ned moved noiselessly to and fro as he busied himself with taking the neatly folded articles from the chest his mother had fondly packed that day and which was going by carrier's cart to London. He was not minded to go to bed, for in truth he was far from sleepy, but he was in no mood for companionship of any sort. Despite the fact that his cherished dream was shortly to be realized, his heart was uncomfortably near his throat. He was already experiencing his first taste of homesickness before ever he had left his home. He had bade all his friends farewell, and though he knew they envied him his good fortune, he had a dozen minds to change it with them. Not that he regretted leaving them overmuch; it was the parting on the morrow from his own home-people that cast its shadow over the warm-natured, simple fellow and filled him with a vague uneasiness. By and by, when he had conquered the feeling, he meant to steal down to the street and sally forth. Perhaps he might find some of his mates at the Swan listening to the talk of the elders, and a game of shove-groat would do much to dispel his sadness.

Meanwhile he bent over the chest and took out his few belongings and arranged them differently, whistling softly over his self-appointed task and trying by that means to call back his man's

spirit. Several times he glanced around at the bed which Hamnet was wont to share with him, but the little fellow was not there. Edmund strongly suspected that he had stolen away and was, even then, standing without the Swan, bending close to the red-lattice in order to catch the sound of a certain voice within raised in some goodly tale. Of a truth, Ned had no wish to play the master and send the little lad home. Let him stay there an he would! Why, even the women below-stairs would wink at the boy's wrong-doing, could they but guess it, knowing why he waited and what the passing moments meant to him. The youth's heart was full of an unusual tenderness for his nephew, and though he was never one to weigh his own thoughts nor to give much importance to them, he could not but think how he should feel were he in the child's stead, and sympathy sharpened his perceptions.

Hamnet, however, was not in Bridge Street, nor had he had any intention of going thither. Lingering near taverns and ale-houses had been prohibited and the lad had no mind to violate even the least of his father's commands. He was hiding in a far corner of the dark attic, fighting with himself, and with the wish that grew ever stronger within him to withhold the message altogether from Ned. And yet, insistent as that

longing was, he felt that it was too late to admit any scruples of regret into his consideration; they should have been thought of before he had voluntarily joined in the conspiracy against his uncle's happiness. Say he forgave Ned everything, the blow to Silver, the cruel words uttered in the garden, the crueller words which Diccon had repeated and even the way he meant to oust him, Hamnet, from his rightful place in his father's heart, say he forgave all that, forgot all that. What still remained? A boy's promise —a boy's word—something which could not be lightly broken, something which must stand as steady and true as the Queen's oath.

The suffering little soul was full of agony as the warfare within his breast went on without cessation. Which was right, which was right—he asked himself again and again—to keep his word, or to save Ned? They could not both be right. Which course should he follow? On the instant there came to him a phrase his father had uttered: 'Let it never be said o' my little lad that he is a promise-breaker.'

Like a drowning man catching at a straw the boy caught at this remembrance now and turned it into an argument for his own conduct. In the absence of any guidance he must act upon this advice and keep his honour unsmirched. It was the flimsiest kind of reasoning, but the child,

troubled and sore distraught, hesitated no longer. His hand sought the paper in his bosom and drew it forth, twisting it noiselessly into the form of a ball; the next moment it whizzed into the room past the kneeling youth and fell just before him into the open chest.

Ned, startled from his reverie, looked around quickly, half expecting to see his nephew or some friend who had stolen softly up the stair to surprise him at his work, but there was no one in sight and the silence all about was unbroken. He laughed outright at his folly, and yet, surely, there had been something to disturb him—some sound—some— His wandering glance rested on the crumpled wad which, partially opened by its fall, was lying upon his clothes. So, he had been asleep after all and this thing had waked him; somebody had crawled up to leave the message and had gone as quietly; he did not puzzle himself to guess the person's identity, but opened the paper eagerly and held it to the light. There were only a few words scribbled in a hasty hand, unknown, yet still with a strange hint of familiarity in some of the letters.

"Marry," he cried, half aloud, "I'm bidden to Sanctity Lane near the sally-piece by nine o' the clock to learn summat o' import before I go to London, and the mad wag who hath writ this hath put no mark nor sign to let me know who he is

withal. Ha—ha, Phil Rogers, 'tis thy hand I swear, thou canst not trick me, my sweet rogue. Now what wild sport art up to, eh? I' faith I will not go—i' faith I will, though! My very last night in Stratford town I'll e'en be one wi' the lads i' their pranks. 'Twill help to do away wi' this heaviness, I warrant me."

He scrambled up from the side of the chest leaving the clothes strewn in disorder on the floor and extinguished the candle, then he stumbled down the stairs. Hamnet drew back into the deeper gloom as his uncle hurried by; the next moment he crept cautiously after him.

The living-room was deserted, for the two women had stepped over to Neighbour Quiney's for a brief word with his good wife, and Ned just paused long enough on its threshold to cast a glance at the clock whose hands pointed to past the hour, before he hastened into the street and plunged forward whistling gayly.

The summer night was dusky but not dark; there was no moon, and the stars had a faint, far-away shining about their splendour as if they had little love for the earth and what went on there. A soft, white mist had risen from the river and floated between the trees and bushes like a filmy veil which lent an air of remoteness to their familiar shapes. Hamnet crawled into the shadow of the garden-wall and peered into

the street, following with eyes which almost refused to do their office the tall, well-knit figure moving ever on into the gloom. How quickly Ned went, almost as if he had wings. Would nothing stay him—could nothing stay him? The little lad shivered in sudden apprehension as the answer to that unspoken question flashed into his mind. Ay, go thy ways, Ned Shakespeare, an thou tread'st never so lightly, and whistl'st never so sweetly, there's somewhat waiting for thee in Sanctity Lane that shall cry halt to those brisk steps and peace to that merry tune.

Hamnet ran out into the centre of the street. He had kept his word—his honour was white—and yet the greatness of the wrong he had just committed overwhelmed him with a terrible feeling of horror. How could he bear to defeat Ned's hopes? How could he bear to have him suffer? For suffer he would, and that most fearfully; his captors would know no mercy. Words of warning, words of love and tenderness leaped to the child's lips, and he was powerless to utter the least of them. He stood there speechless, looking, listening, trying with all his might to call, but the shout was the veriest whisper, and he could only murmur with sobbing breath:

"Ned, Ned, come back, I cry thee pardon, come back!"

And Ned, speeding on, heard naught.

Hamnet remained in the same spot like one turned to stone, while that whistle grew faint and fainter. How long he stood there tongue-tied—helpless, he never knew. It seemed ages to him; in reality it was but a few minutes, though each one in passing lengthened itself out indefinitely to his tortured mind; and still he was incapable of moving—incapable of thinking even. Suddenly a thought pierced its way to his benumbed brain—he must save Ned! In a second, as if a door had been set wide, there followed a host of rushing, half-formed ideas; he must overtake him, reach the appointed place before him, help him in what fray there was, come off victorious, or be borne away, too, down-stream without another word from father. He could not hold back now.

He darted swiftly on over the way Ned had travelled, but though he ran his fleetest, he could catch no glimpse of the figure he sought, nor hear no least sound that would indicate his presence. It was just possible that the youth had paused at one of the taverns to see if any of his friends were there who would bear him company, but Hamnet could not tarry in his turn. The town was very still. The houses he passed were, for the most part, dark and quiet, though here and there a lighted casement flung a patch of brightness out over the ground. An occasional

burst of jollity issued faintly through the red-latticed screens of the ale-houses lying along the way, and in the distance, moving along slowly, he caught the glimmer of the horn-lantern carried by the watch. He slipped more into the shadow and sped on warily. 'Twould be a sorry thing to have the watch clap a detaining hand upon his shoulder and walk him off to the Town Cage, or to the stocks. The little lad had a vague notion of the swiftness of justice; he knew something of the strictness of the law which required that all apprentices and servants, found in the streets after nine 'o'clock, should be summarily dealt with, and he felt that the same treatment would be meted out to any and every straggler.

It occurred to him on the moment that Ned, wishing to avoid the watch, had taken the other road, which was longer, but which was rarely used after dark and so escaped vigilance except of the most transitory nature. The thought put new force into his flying feet; he dashed forward, his heart beating in his ears like a smith's hammer, his breath coming in great gasps. So running, he came at last to Sanctity Lane, and turning away from the church with its brooding air of peace, he started up toward the willow plantation.

There was no one stirring in the length and breadth of the lane but himself; the stillness round about was so deep that it filled the boy

with an overwhelming sense of fear. Suddenly it was broken by a succession of loud, uncanny cries. Some of the Trinity rooks—those same rooks that were so monstrously well-behaved o' Sundays, and were ever setting an example of quietness to the lads—cawed right lustily among the trees, and one of them whirred with a tremendous fluttering of his wings into the air, and circled above his nest before swooping down again, his clamour dying away into a silence which was all the more awful for the lack of the strident noise.

Hamnet felt the earth totter beneath his feet. He was too late! What was to happen in Sanctity Lane had happened, and only the rooks were the wiser. He took a step forward with a faint gasp of horror, and just then from the distance on his left there came a sound that made his brain reel. He paused and raised his head, straining his ears to listen. The sound came a little nearer—he could not mistake it—he—it—His heart leaped for very joy! It was Ned's whistle—he'd swear to it anywhere; no one in all the world could whistle 'Green Sleeves' like Ned! Now, God be praised! he was still in time.

With a great bound he reached the low line of underbrush that formed a hedge at one side of the way; there he halted and gave vent to two soft,

shrill notes; he paused and counted three (how could he bear to pause even for that brief space when that merry music was coming ever nearer?) —he repeated the notes and then, while the cuckoo's call was still vibrating on the air, he called out sharply: "London!"

There was a long moment of silence—of suspense—before a gruff voice almost at his elbow answered: "Father."

"Quick," Hamnet cried, "away wi' ye! This work may not be done to-night nor any other time."

"Thou'st played us false," Diccon hissed, "but an thine uncle gets off wi' a whole skin the same shall not be said o' thee."

Hamnet sprang beyond the reach of the extended arm. The rippling melody of 'Green Sleeves' was growing each instant more distinct —but hark! from that other direction there came the murmur of voices and look—look—a gleam of light, like some little heaven-born star drooping low to earth.

"Thou shalt reckon wi' me as thou wilt anon," he whispered, "but get thee gone now. Canst thou not hear the watch? Nay, I speak the very truth—see for thyself."

"The watch! the watch!" Wat Cawdrey cried, "I'll na be caught here and set i' the stocks for three days running for all the Ned Shakespeares

i' the world. Let go thy hold, Diccon Hobday, thou shalt na be off first."

There was a hurried scuffle in the bushes, and the next instant three dark figures fled out of the cover. Hamnet caught a glimpse of them as they scurried across a bit of open before they gained the shadow of the thicket beyond. At that moment a group of men, one of them swinging a lantern, turned from Bull Lane into Sanctity. It was not the watch, however, but merely a few neighbours returning late from some pastime, though the boy, supposing them to be the guardians of the peace, had given the alarm in good faith. As they neared his hiding-place in the underbrush, where he had hastily concealed himself, he recognized from snatches of their conversation that they were Puritans, who had met in all likelihood at the other end of the town to worship with their fellows, and were even then separating for the night. He could hear their pious utterances as they commended one another to the Lord's keeping. They passed close to the little lad, not noticing him, nor did they pay any heed to the merry whistler who sped now in full sight diagonally across the open lands to the lane itself, thinking him, doubtless, some roisterer who had taken more than his fill of ale, and with whom it were well to have naught to do. They raised their voices in a solemn hymn to drown the gay.

ungodly tune and so, singing, they went their different ways.

As Ned reached the bushes Hamnet rushed out upon him. He had formed no clear idea in his mind of what he should say or do. To him his uncle was only safe for the moment. Diccon and his companions had retreated but a short distance, and if they were hiding in the woods they might return as soon as the Puritans were out of hearing; they would recognize them as readily from their speech as he had done. He caught the young fellow's arm in his trembling hands.

"Get hence, Ned, get hence," he whispered, "'twas I that brought thee hither. Nay, tarry not an instant; there's grievous harm hard-by."

"Thou, Hamnet, what mak'st thou here? thou, little lad——"

"Ay, no one else," the boy sobbed, trying to push the youth with a strength which on the sudden had grown of no avail. "Look not so sorrowfully — look angerly — chide me— I would have stayed thy going wi' father, and so I took counsel o' them that would help me."

Ned shook himself free from the hold of the clinging figure, stung by his nephew's admission. As far as he himself was concerned, he had no fear of any foes, but for this self-confessed one of his own household—this one who had been a traitor—he could find no outlet for his scorn.

"'Tis a pity," he sneered, after a moment, "that thy heart should fail thee, thou unworthiest villain, thou that canst be steadfast to no single thing!"

"Upbraid me an thou wilt, I deserve no less," Hamnet interrupted, "but tarry not, tarry not, else will they come back. I would not have thee stayed—I sent them off—I said the watch was nigh."

His fast-coming sobs almost choked back the rushing words. "Oh! at the last I wanted thee to go wi' father—i' faith I did—i' faith I do—'Twas only that I'd given my promise when I was wroth wi' thee—I cry thee pardon—I— Oh! get thee hence—I——"

Something in the tired, gasping voice found its way to Ned's heart and made him acutely conscious of many things besides his own angry feelings. In a second he realized what it had cost Hamnet to give up his revenge. The night run with its hidden, imaginary dangers, more awful to the child than any of the harsh certainties of day—dark though they might be—was nothing in comparison with the struggle which must have gone on in his breast. He seemed sore spent and the lifted, pleading face showed ghastly in the surrounding gloom. Compassion softened Ned's eyes; he put out his hand with a good-humoured laugh.

"Nay, little lad," he said, "we'll bury all ill-will here, and so let's go home together. In sooth, thou'lt be roundly shent by thy mother and mine own an they do but see thee. Come! I'll save thee a rating for this last time, peradventure we may steal to bed wi'out their knowledge."

Hamnet caught the outstretched hand in his eager grasp and pressed his face against it, kissing it again and again and caring naught that his tears were falling fast. They were such happy tears—for were not Ned and he friends—was not Ned safe?

CHAPTER XVI

O, nature! what hadst thou to do in hell,
When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend
In mortal paradise of such sweet flesh?—
Was ever book containing such vile matter
So fairly bound? O, that deceit should dwell
In such a gorgeous palace!

ROMEO AND JULIET.

We do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

MERCHANT OF VENICE.

THE night brought only troubled slumber to the little lad, black dreams from which he wakened with a start to sob and sob again softly to himself as he relived their terrors and then found peace and reassurance in the sound of Ned's contented breathing. It was a satisfaction, at such moments, simply to put out his hand and touch his uncle's arm, clinging to him gently as if his hold could save him in his unconsciousness from untold dangers. Waking or sleeping there was ever the fear that Diccon would in some way sweep down to his revenge and bear the unresisting youth off to that hut in the fields, there

to keep him in hiding till time should be no more.

The first grey stirrings of dawn, creeping in through the chinks of the tiny window, looked into the wide-opened hazel eyes, and at its glance some of the unreasoning alarm in the boy's breast was dispelled. It was day at last. He crawled out of bed noiselessly. Usually he slept on the inner side, but Ned had humoured his request the night before, and had changed places with the little fellow, not knowing that the small figure was interposed as a barrier between him and the vague apprehensions conjured up by the child's fancy.

Hamnet tip-toed across the room to the corner where a little coffer stood in which he kept his choicest belongings; he knelt down at its side and turned the contents over impatiently until he found what he sought, then he took it to the light and inspected it closely. It was a fair-sized knife with a verse running along the blade—his father had given it to him at the New Year, and not a boy in the Grammar School had one half so fine. He had considered it too good for every-day use; the Sheffield whittle—his grandfather's gift—was kept in constant service, but this one was only taken forth on especial occasions and then put back again with greatest care. He meant to use it always when he was a man! He fell to polishing it with his handkerchief, breath-

ing softly on the steel and watching the tiny blur cloud its brightness for one moment, only to vanish the next, and by its going cause a greater lustre than before. When mortal efforts could make it shine no fairer, he went over to the open chest where Ned's clothes lay in a tumbled mass and slipped it in, covering it carefully. Sometime in London town, a week hence belike, belike longer, Ned, tossing up his things, would come across the knife, and would guess on the instant how it had come there. He would know what hand had stowed it away, and his thoughts leaping back to Stratford would be thanks enough.

Swiftly as the next few hours went to the household in Henley Street, even the minutes seemed to drag intolerably to one of the inmates there. Hamnet could feel no real sense of security while Ned remained in Stratford. There might come some mischance at any time to hinder his departure, and should that happen—the boy's imagination reeled at thought of the worser evils lurking behind. He hovered about his uncle in a protecting way that was very pretty to see. To the elders, with one exception, there was nothing remarkable in this constant show of devotion; Susanna and Judith were as unremitting in their attentions. The near prospect of parting with a dearly loved friend and playmate, for that Ned had always been to the children, easily ac-

counted for the manner in which they pressed close at his side with gentle words.

Will Shakespeare, however, quickly perceived the change in his little lad's face. Whatever misunderstanding there had been hitherto between the two boys, it existed no longer. There was no animosity in Hamnet's glance, that was apparent to the observant eyes; what was not so apparent was the reason for the excitement in the child's bearing, and the fluctuating colour in his cheeks. Still this was no time for idle conjecture—the moment that showed the father the triumphing of his son's better nature over his jealousy was too bright to be dimmed by any of his own vague fears. The lad had come bravely through the struggle unaided; it was only natural that it should have cost him something.

There was an additional fondness, too, in Ned's gaze whenever it was turned upon his nephew, and a touch of respect which had never been there before. The sobbing, incoherent confession Hamnet had made the previous night had shown him, in part, the tortures the valiant little heart had endured. That there had been some plot afoot to set back his journey seemed improbable enough to the older boy, when the younger one refused persistently to reveal the names of the conspirators, and was loud in words of self-censure.

It never occurred to Ned for a moment to connect Diccon Hobday with the matter; none of the lads of good family and position in Stratford had aught to do with him; he was a notorious bully and idler, and one who was ever in mischief of some sort. It seemed as unlikely, therefore, that Hamnet should be associated with him in his evil practices as to say that Avon was sheer ice in the summer-time. Diccon, in reporting the fight which had taken place in the Warwick road the week before, had drawn largely upon his imagination for the reasons which occasioned it, though the fact remained that there had been an encounter in which Ned Shakespeare had come off victor. When a lazy lout steals an old woman's savings, as Diccon Hobday had stolen Goody Baker's few pence, they be sorry fists that will not treat such a rogue to the drubbing he so richly deserves, and Ned had not been loath to give the cowardly thief a lesson. He had whipped him in a fair fight, however, for he was never one to take even the meanest adversary at a disadvantage, but when at last the dastardly fellow had cried 'Hold!' and had reluctantly given up the money, Ned had gone on his way without bestowing another thought upon the wretch grovelling in the dust where he had spurned him.

The plot as Hamnet whispered it, now veiling and anon unveiling it, was shrouded in a mystery

which had Ned had a few days longer at home he would have sifted out to his complete satisfaction. As things were, however, he was forced to let it rest, promising himself to disentangle it at some future time, and then reward those hidden enemies of his with interest; only for this enemy, who had given up his vengeance at the last, there was nothing but a heartwhole pardon. One who, in his remorse, could take all the blame to himself, who uttered no least word of upbraiding and did not seek to extenuate his actions, was surely one to be forgiven. Ned, after that first flash of anger in Sanctity Lane, was conscious of a tenderer affection than ever for the little lad, and when, the piteous tale ended, the child had clung to him, sobbing: "Thou'lt not seek to cozen me from my place in father's heart?" he had recognized his sufferings and had answered convincingly:

"Nay, thou'rt mad to think that—thou dost thy father and me grievous wrong to hold such thoughts. 'Twas some fiend told thee. An I should do that thing may I be blasted forever!"

With the memory of those words stirring in his breast, and the ring of the indignant voice sounding in his ears, it was no wonder that Hamnet should put Diccon's insinuations from him resolutely, and that all his thoughts toward his uncle should be fair ones. Still, haunted as he

was by that strange dread of evil which even the morning light was powerless to banish, he wished Ned away.

Poor Ned! 'Twas but a sorry figure he cut that morn with his untasted breakfast before him, for how could a body eat when there was a lump the size of a penny-loaf in his throat? Even the braveness of his attire set oddly upon him, he had forgot so completely all that jaunty swagger with which he had borne himself but yesterday. He looked in very truth like the boy he was, not like the man he would fain have others think him. And though he laughed right stoutly and talked much in a high, unnatural voice, there was scant sense in what he said. However, there was no one by to notice his sorry attempts at wit, and surely not his mother, for the littlest thing did make her laugh, as 'twas indeed the case with all the rest.

Suddenly a noise in the street without came as an interruption to the gay, inconsequent talk, and when they had hurried to the door, though they knew full well what it meant, there stood the two saddle-horses held by the grinning boy from the Swan, whose face broadened at sight of Will Shakespeare, with whose generosity he already had had some acquaintance. He ducked his head with a clumsy attempt at a bow, and looked out from under his shock of hair in open-mouthed as-

tonishment at the evidences of emotion about him.

"When fowkses be goin' to Lunnon," he said later in the day to his fellow-servant at the inn, "'tis summat to be proud on, but ye'd ha' thought the Shaxpers, look'ee, was goin' to they's own buryin' to see they. Ned's face was the len'th o' Trinity steeple and a smacked a's old 'oman on her cheeks, an' she hung raound a's neck an' at the last a had to tak 's two hands an' set he loose. An' Wully Shaxper's brows be drawed, an' a said 'Come on!' an' wi' that, a's little lad clombed him up behint an' so they gallops off. I' fecks, thinks I, there be-eth no pence for I this morn, but 'twas no sooner i' my pate when Wully pulled in 's horse and tossed I summat. What think 'ee? 'Twas a shillin'! La, now, I wisht such fowkses went every day to Lunnon. I ha' ruther see a grievin' man set off nor a laughin' one, says I—your grievin' man keepeth but a half eye on a's money, an' a shillin' looketh no bigger nor a saxpence."

The travellers from Henley Street joined the small gathering of horsemen already assembled at the Swan, and rode off in their company, keeping well to the rear. Ned had no desire for society just then, and Will Shakespeare had the excuse of lingering yet a short space with the child who sat behind him. The boy, from his position, cast

ever and anon a wary glance around, seeing in every bush some fancied resemblance to those bushes in Sanctity Lane, and fearing that, despite the brightness of the early morning, some harm might even then befall the fresh-faced, unconscious youth on his right. It would be so easy for an arrow to come singing through the air and find its home in the new plum-coloured jerkin, or to wing by the ear beneath the soft, dark curls so close, that it might bite off the tip in its flight. But the sun, mounting higher, looked down on a scene full of peace and beauty, with no faintest suspicion of harm abroad. From the group of men in front occasional bursts of laughter and gay scraps of conversation were borne back to the others on the breeze. A woodman's axe, with a cheerful ring in its note, sounded in the near-by thicket, and a servant-lass, stepping briskly across the fields, lifted her blithe voice in song.

There was little said by the three; the sadness of an indefinite parting weighed heavily upon their spirits. Suddenly Ned Shakespeare reined in his horse and looked back for the last glimpse of the distant town where it lay beyond the shimmering river. After a few moments of thus looking, he straightened himself resolutely and faced again toward the London road winding farther and farther from home. A sense of the stern realities of life sharpened his young features; in

that moment the curtain which, till then, had shrouded the threshold of his manhood was drawn aside, and he had taken a long farewell of his heedless, inconsequent boyhood. He rode quite near his brother. "I be going forward now," he said, simply, but with a new ring in his voice; "thou wilt want these last few minutes wi' Hamnet alone."

He bent swiftly and kissed the small, white face.

"I would thou wert going wi' us in good sooth, little lad," he said, huskily, "but cheerly, true heart, cheerly, 'twill not be long before thou'lt ride wi' us all the way. Marry, I would that time were now."

Hamnet clung to the extended hand with all his might.

"And so do I," he cried in choking accents, "and so do I— Thou'lt send me a letter?"

"I' faith, I cannot say—ask me not, dear wag, I be but a poor wight at anything o' the sort—but there! peradventure I'll try."

"And thou'lt keep a good watch on father—an he hath a pose, or quack, or any other ill thou'lt care for him?"

"Beshrew me else! Why that's Ned Shakespeare's chiefest business i' London — to be a help and comfort to 's brother. Nay, now farewell."

The two hands fell apart and the next moment Ned galloped ahead with a fierce clatter, a little cloud of dust rising on either side of him and spreading out upon the cobwebbed grass along the way.

"Ned 's a good lad," Will Shakespeare said half-aloud, then, more to himself than to the boy, he continued, "I' faith I shall be glad to have him by me, 'twill seem like a bit o' home."

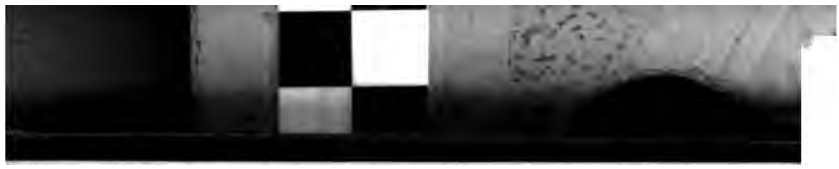
"I would have stayed his going," Hamnet murmured, faintly.

It was the veriest whisper, wrung from the child almost against his will. A refractory buckle in the strap engrossed the man's attention on the instant so that he did not perceive the note of anguish in the low voice, then he lifted his head.

"Wouldst thou? Marry, thou hast conquered thy wicked thought, my brave boy—my Hector. Thou wouldst not stay him now?"

"Nay—not now. I be glad for many reasons that he is gone, that he will be wi' thee, that 'tis his wish, but chiefest that he will be out o' harm's way."

"O' harm's way, say'st thou? Now I pray Heaven he fall not into harm's way. By my troth, there be many pitfalls in London life for a country lad, but he will be ever near me and I'll e'en guard him an I can."



"I would have stayed his going," the little voice repeated, monotonously.

"Yea, yea, but that is past, think not on it longer, my own true heart."

"The whistle thou heard'st yestreen was to remember me o' my promise."

Will Shakespeare jerked in his horse and turned to face the child. "What whistle—what promise?"

"Why, in the garden when Judith would have us listen—she misliked it sore—oh! thou know'st, surely, and Ned said 'twas some signal and it was even so."

There was a momentary pause which was filled in by a shout of laughter from the horsemen on in front, but faintly, too, for they had fared well forward. Hamnet caught his breath and went on unflinchingly.

"'Twas to remember me o' the message I was to give Ned to—to trick him—nay I cannot tell thee—to—to keep him back——"

"What!" Will Shakespeare cried in a voice of anger. "Didst thou conspire with others against thine uncle — against my own brother? Fie upon thee! Was that the business yester-noon that kept thee from my side? Didst come from that base work to join us in our pleasures? Answer me—out with it—say but one word."

"Yea."

Again there was a pause, and again that note of merriment was borne back to them on the still air where they halted in the roadway beneath the arching trees that bent above them as a bird broods over her young. A dunnock in the bushes uttered its tender, plaintive song, unconscious of the heart-break abroad.

It was a bitter moment to both man and child, such an one as alters the aspect of the world in an unforgettable fashion. The boy was suffering in every nerve of his body, and the man, whose sympathies were ever with all that was unselfish, generous, and good, to whom honour—in the least, as in the greatest action—was the light by which he was wont to live, experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling at the revelation of the guilt practised by one who was dearer to him than life and fame. In his ears he could hear again the little lad's voice as it had been raised in song the afternoon before and he could still see the laughing face whose smiles had all the while masked those treacherous intentions. The baseness in the boy's heart was like the canker in the folded bud—unseen—unguessed—from the beauty without, which yet might spread—God alone knew whither.

Will Shakespeare put his hand before his eyes, his anger lost in a great, engulfing sorrow. In that brief space of time many of his brightest hopes had their death.

"Let me know thy story," he said at last, pity in his voice and glance; "let me try to understand it that I may find some way to forgive thee."

Then there followed one of those miserable half-confidences in which the mists of misunderstanding do but gather the more closely. The little lad, in his compunction, kept back what would have justified his own conduct in part. He realized that by repeating what Diccon Hobday had said he might reinstate himself in his father's affection, but in so doing it would be at Ned's expense; and after one moment of temptation, he could not let Ned suffer. Surely it was enough to say that, jealous of his uncle's going to London, he had quarrelled with him, and knowing of some older lads who had a grudge against him, he had been willing to betray him into their hands. His halting, disconnected sentences only deepened the confusion and made his case hopeless. Nothing was clear to the listening man save that the traitorous message had been writ and delivered by his own son; after which—fear of the results seizing upon the child—he had warned Ned in some fashion and so the evil had been averted.

"Who were thy helpers, thy masters, rather?" he demanded abruptly when the recital had come to an end, "for I cannot think that one o' thy years could devise so hellish a scheme."

"Nay, ask me not," Hamnet cried; "I've given my word not to tell."

"Then keep that much o' thine honour clean; I will not seek to know, but an thou ever loved'st me cut loose from their company. Get thee down."

The boy clung to the strong figure wildly.

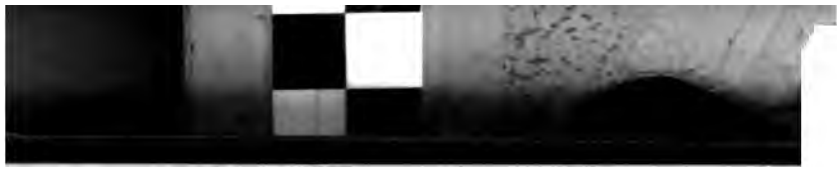
"I pr'ythee let me ride as far as to the hill-top—as far as to yon bush even——"

"Nay, not another step—here we must part—get down."

"Thou'lt not leave me angerly—thou'lt pardon me and—and—thou'lt kiss me, dear Father—sweet Father——"

"Think'st thou this day is not a heavy one for me also?" Will Shakespeare asked with a broken voice, as he unloosened the small fingers and cast them from him. "There! there! I pardon thee, little lad. Now Heaven forbid that I should hold my pardon back, only thou hast made my heart dark, thou who hast ever been its light. Nay, nay, I must kiss thee, sweet, I'll not go from thee in anger—but keep thy life clean, dear boy, and so make amends. Farewell."

He put the lad from him resolutely and galloped on without one backward glance; he could not trust himself to look again at the pitiful, tear-stained face; he would not see the little fellow come running after him to the hill's crest. He knew as well as though he had watched every



step of that painful progress how the boy, blinded by his tears, would stumble on and on, and then would wait breathlessly for that last glimpse. He'd not turn back to wave his hand—even the withholding of that sign would be some slight punishment and the child deserved some punishment surely.

"I' faith," the man said bitterly to himself, "an we all got what we deserved, which one o' us would come off free?"

Just before him the road curved abruptly; a few yards farther on and horse and rider would be lost to view. He was almost there—nay, he'd not look back, the boy must be made to suffer; he had reached the bend— —Involuntarily his fingers twitched on the reins and the obedient steed paused. For one moment there was a mighty conflict in the man's breast, the next he turned in his saddle and waved his hand in a last farewell to the little figure above him. There was an answering signal in return, then the rider spurred forward. He was too far away to see the sudden joy that transfigured the child's face, as the sunlight breaking through the banks of clouds glorifies the storm-swept land, too far away to hear the faint cry, "I'll make amends, sweet Father."

CHAPTER XVII

An honest tale speeds best being plainly told.
RICHARD III.

A letter for me? It gives me an estate of seven years' health.
CORIOLANUS.

IT was Saturday and a half-holiday at the Grammar School. Some of the boys were gone for a game of ball to the field beyond the Weir Brake, others lingered in the playgrounds back of the Guild buildings busy with prisoners' base, and still others were playing at tag across the open common of the town itself. There were divers ways of spending a half-holiday, as many and dissimilar as there were boys to play withal.

Hamnet, however, had no mind to join in any of the sports, but sat instead on the door-step of his own home, his head sunk dejectedly on one hand. Susanna and Judith had just set off for Shottery to meet their mother and to return thence in the early evening. He had watched them disappear in the distance with an almost indifferent glance; later he might follow them, though he would give no promise in answer to their cajoling words.

The day was sultry, and a lowering sky, with not a glimpse of blue to be seen anywhere, stretched above the parched earth; for twenty-four hours the dense mass of copperish-coloured clouds had hung thus heavy, and still not a drop of rain had fallen. But the boy, idly noting the low-darting swallows, knew that the storm would not be delayed overlong. There were other indubitable signs abroad which he could not fail to perceive. The soft smoke from the different chimneys fell dispiritedly, shrouding their sides as with a veil, the oxen in Neighbour Bridges's field hard-by were snuffing the air with impatient nostrils and looking vainly to the south with longing in their eyes; the bees had gathered in swarms close to their hives, not venturing farther away, and some great blue-bottle flies buzzed sluggishly within reach of Silver's capacious jaws—Silver, who in his turn, would drowse awhile and then rise listlessly to scrape up the earth in the garden-bed in a futile search, or anon would stretch himself with loud yawns.

All the morning Hamnet had seen the rooks go circling past the school-room windows, now appearing and now disappearing, restless as were the other birds and beasts. Their harsh cries filling the air reminded him of the noise they had made that night in Sanctity Lane, and the horror of that dark moment pervaded his being again

with a force that chilled the blood in his veins. The night with its hideous details was still fresh in his memory, the remembrance of it followed him to his bed in the lonely attic and plagued him through the long hours there. It was at his side when he woke from his fitful snatches of sleep, and throughout the day the least thing would bring it before him. He was haunted continually by the thought of what might have happened if some accident had delayed his footsteps and Ned, whistling gayly, had advanced alone to that dark line of underbrush. If—if—if— The little mind was in an agony of torture.

The remorse the sensitive nature had undergone—and was undergoing—was a punishment more cruel than any the most fiendish imagination could devise. One moment the content of Ned's safety and ready pardon was a salve to the open, stinging wounds, the next they ached unbearably; though forgiven, the child could not forgive himself. Perhaps sometime, he argued, when he had done some worthy thing—some thing so full of honour that his father would thrill with pride to hear of it—he might then forget all the deceit and treachery which now weighed so heavily upon him.

Not the least among his bitter memories was the remembrance of his father's anger and scorn. It was like a lash to his shrinking flesh. But

keener, bitterer, more poignant by far was the knowledge of the deep sorrow he had caused the man. What! he, Hamnet, who would have walked over burning ploughshares to save him the littlest, littlest ache, who would have suffered untold miseries to keep pain of any sort from him, to burden him in this cruel fashion! To have made his heart dark, he who had ever been its light! The thought brought its own anguish—it was past enduring.

Every word his father had uttered was stamped upon his brain—he could hear them everywhere; clearly, sternly, sadly, they echoed and re-echoed through his being. And then that parting embrace not one whit the less tender for what had happened—those lingering kisses not the less dear because they were given in sorrow—those words that were fairer than the fairest music: 'Nay, I must kiss thee, sweet—I'll not go from thee in anger—' while the memory of these brought comfort, the sting of his unworthiness robbed that comfort of all peace. He realized, after some vague fashion, that he had failed his father and he could not justify himself even in his own eyes. There was no justification possible. He could never begin to express all the evil that had lurked in his jealousy of Ned; the black, malicious thoughts stumbled back incessantly to upbraid him. And besides that jealousy—and what

it might have led to—he had forgot the Shakespeare honour and had tossed his word aside as carelessly as good Master Combe often scattered coins that the boys might scramble for them in a fine game of Muss. He was a promise-breaker! Why, not a boy at school but would cry 'fie' to hear that he could unswear an oath so lightly.

Over and over again in an unending circle, these thoughts presented themselves to the little lad, now one, now the other, now altogether, until it almost seemed as if his strength would fail him so weary did he become. He had grown paler, too, and hollow-eyed, and his head often ached, though not as his heart did; still he uttered no word of complaint. With an undaunted bravery of mien which he had inherited from his father, he faced the dreary days and the interminable nights. He was gentler, perhaps, than he had ever been, and those about him not understanding—for it is not always given to those who live nearest us to see the most clearly—thought that it was the separation from his dearly beloved parent which, for the time being, had put a check upon his usually merry spirits.

"The trouble will mend with the days," Mistress Mary Shakespeare told herself softly, sorrowing for the pain the little fellow must bear alone; "an 'twere not for the balm they bring us our grief would know no ease."

In the midst of all this distress of mind Hamnet had not felt one throb of apprehension for the punishment which he might look for at any moment from Diccon Hobday. On the comfortless, homeward walk that Tuesday morning, when, despite the sun's shining and all the brave summer beauty around him, he was only aware of the darkness in his own breast, he had half expected to be waylaid by Diccon and his followers, and to receive at their hands that which he had courted and deserved. But he had crept on unmolested, sick at heart, though not from fear of any bodily ill. Since that time three days had elapsed and as yet Diccon had made no move of any sort, though there was small danger that he would break his word. The little lad, however, did not wish the promise to be broken as far as he was concerned. If he had deserved contempt for slighting his own word, let that contempt be wiped out with blows—only in that way could he begin afresh.

He sat quite still for some minutes after his sisters had taken their departure, gazing idly before him. The gillyvors in the garden that were wont to flaunt their gay colours in the sun were limp and straggling, with no trace of coquetry left in their bearing, the grass was parched and lifeless, but just where he could see it, a belated 'Jump up and kiss me' lifted its merry little face

from the faded green, a perpetual sunshine in its bright glance. Hamnet regarded it half curiously for a few moments.

"I' faith thou'rt a brave flower," he said at last, in his dreamy fashion; "where all else looketh drear thou'rt still smiling. I do bethink me that's what someone would fain have me do. Even if 'tis dark all around I must be like yon bloom. What is 't the folk here say of it? They call it pansy—h'm!—a pansy—that's for thoughts. Marry, this shall remember me o' father and his ways?" the boy drew in his breath hard and set his face resolutely; after an instant or so he began to whistle a few staves of a song softly to himself.

He broke off suddenly and sprang to his feet, eager to put an end alike to his laziness and to his sad reflections. He opened the door back of him and shouted at the top of his lungs, but his voice sounded hollow and unnatural in the empty house. He waited for the reverberations to cease and something in the stillness of his surroundings filled him with a nameless dread. "Gran," he cried, "Gran!"

There was no answer, and by degrees the remembrance came to him that his grandparents had purposed going that morning to Snitterfield where Henry Shakespeare was lying ill of a slow fever. Hamnet closed the door after him and stepped out again under the pent-house with an

anxious glance at the threatening clouds. He hoped it would not rain for awhile; the grass and flowers must take a lesson from his brave little bloom, and wait with what spirit they could summon to their aid. It must not rain with grandfather and grandmother still from home, and all the others away at Shottery.

On the moment he decided to join his mother and sisters there, and started down the street with Silver stepping proudly at his side. They had only gone a little distance when their progress was barred by a strange figure. It was a short, stout man laden with bundles, and carrying a saddle upon his head in such a fashion that he almost ran the two wayfarers down. Hamnet veered quickly to one side to avoid the danger, then he paused outright.

"Give ye good den, good Neighbour Page," he said, with his ready courtesy, "an thou wilt, I'll gladly help thee."

The stranger thus addressed came to a standstill in his turn and pushed back his curious headgear, disclosing a fat, red face, down which the drops of perspiration were trickling in their vain haste to overtake one another.

"Oh, ho," he cried, in a deep, pleasant voice, "'tis Will Shakespeare's little lad. Marry, but thou may'st help me—it shall never be said o' Nick Page that he refused a friend's offer when it

came i' the nick o' time. There's a jest, hark 'ee that might please the world an I were handy wi' my pen. The nick o' time quoth I, when thou camest to help me, Nick Page! Here, take this bundle and bear it wi' care. What! wilt have another to keep it company? Why, there, the burdening o' thine arms is the easing o' mine own. And for myself I can rid me o' this monstrous copatain hat that liketh me not and carry it so. Verily, an I'd not leave it at the Swan for it to serve every man's turn I must e'en turn myself into a sumpter's horse. I' faith I'd not have that smug-faced drawer, Tom Hedges saddle himself wi' it, he looks groats out o' a man! But how shall I pay thee, little lad?"

"I want no pay, good Master Page."

"Ay, but thou shalt have pay, thou must have pay—now before we part I'll give thee summat as cost me naught and yet 'twill be richer than gold to thee. Riddle me that an thou canst. 'Ods nouns, 'tis as good a riddle as was ever set down i' a book. Where dost think I come from?"

"From London, belike."

"Nay, to 't again—thy thoughts are all for London, I trow. 'Twas not from London and yet there was an o in it. An o in it—Ho, ho! That's good i' faith, passing good, but now I do bethink me there were many o's in it, for when I lay at the Crown I heard a vast number o' sighs——"

"The Crown? Thou wert at Oxford then and —I pr'ythee, good Master Page, was it when my sweet father was there?"

"Ay, that it was. Now I give Heaven praise here's my house already, how quick time doth speed in pleasant company! Yea, thy father was there, lad, and we'd a cup o' clary together (but prithee, no word o' that!) and Ned was there, too. A fine youth and a manly; he'll make a gallant player, I warrant me. I hope some day to see him enact a part an 'tis ever my dole to be where my Lord Chamberlain's men are—hist! breathe not that—my good mistress is e'en turned Puritan and her brother—oh Lord! Lord! what ways must we all come to."

"But my father, sweet Master Page, how looked he—was he sad?"

"Nay not sad, and not glad, neither, but shadowed wi' a pleasing melancholy as though the pasty liked him not, and he had few words to say, yet he was no wet blanket on our cheer. Then, on a sudden, the smile was on his face—as quick as the dace leaps i' the stream. Thou couldst never guess the wherefore o' it."

"Nay that I could not, so I pray thee tell it me."

"Why, spoke like a good lad, and I'll e'en to my story. I' faith it must be short and sweet like the posy i' a wedding-ring. Now it so fell

out that business had called me to Oxon some days before thy father came thither, but my wife s brother—Master Abraham Sturley—him that I spoke of just now, journeyed there at the same time. Not i' Will Shakespeare's company—Lord no!—but on the edge o' it as it were, like fringe upon a damsel's petticoat. He and some o' his fellow Puritans had banded themselves together and had ridden on, taking the dust o' the ungodly even into their very nostrils. Well, my wife's brother never lies at the Crown—marry, the meat there mislikes him sore!—so I hied me to his lodgings to greet him. And after we had talked o' this and that I told him that among the travellers who had but just come in were my dear neighbour and friend gentle Will Shakespeare, the very sweetest fellow in all this world, and his brother Ned. Whereupon did my wife's brother fall to talking wi' hums and ha's and shakings o' his head and Lord save us nows! But the heart o' his sentences was this: How that the night before he left Stratford—a Monday night it was—he was out late e'en singing o' hymns and praying o' prayers, and on his way home, when he had almost reached his own door lying well out along Sanctity Lane, he stumbled him o'er a dark figure i' the road. Nay, young lad, there was no clary, nor sack neither, nor so much as a can o' ale at that Puritan meeting.

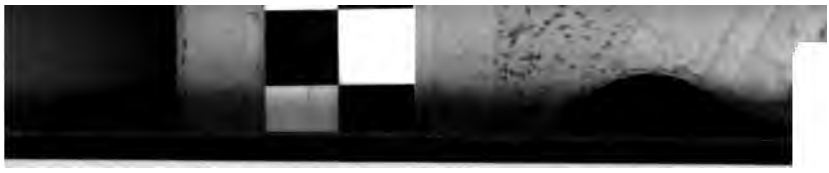
"Well, my brother—my wife's brother—but there! 'tis all the same—was for going forward and then, for that he hath very tender bowels o' compassion, he bent him over the stranger, and when he saw that he was not dead—nor not dead drunk neither—but only stunned by some blow, he worked over him an he were his very own until the fellow oped his eyes. 'Twas that good-for-naught Walter Cawdrey, but my wife's brother is ever for saving a brand from the burning——"

"Wat Cawdrey?"

"Ay, Tony Cawdrey's son and the grief o' the old man's declining days. 'Twas a grievous tale he had to tell, how Diccon Hobday, that most unrighteous knave, had set a plot forward to murder Ned Shakespeare, and for the better furthering o' his vile purpose he had e'en told little Hamnet Shakespeare (that's thee!) the most pitifullest stories, as if they'd come from Ned's own mouth, o' cruel things he said thine own father had spoke about thee. And, at first, though there was no single word o' truth in 'em, Wat did say thou wert angered, and rightfully too, and wert willing to have Ned punished, then thy heart misgave thee and thou'dst not hearken to any harm being done thine uncle. But Diccon plied thee wi' more lies, and said he'd only stay Ned's going to London, so at the last, willy-nilly, he got thy consent to give him some message. And whether

thou didst or not that foolish Walter could not tell, but only that when they were waiting for Ned that Monday night, Diccon and himself and another lad, thou cam'st in his stead and bade them be off, and so frighted 'em wi' saying the watch was nigh, that they scurried away like water-rats. And Diccon, wanting to be first, did quarrel wi' Wat and gave him a blow that sent him flying.

"So that was all, and the moment my brother was done I left him, e'en wi' his mouth open pouring forth the moral o' it all and how Ned Shakespeare should take this as a warning and shun plays and players, and all ungodly mummeries. I ran me back to the Crown as fast as my legs could carry me, and out wi' the tale in a flash, and Ned was all for going back to Stratford to serve Diccon Hobday after his deserts, and he told us what thou hadst done to save him that night, and how thou wouldst not tell the names o' those that were mixed up wi' thee i' the matter, but e'en took all the blame to thyself. This and much more, and when he had come to the end, now I do protest, there was that standing i' thy father's eyes that would ha' made me swear there was onions on his plate did I not know otherwise. Go to! 'twas there, but 'twas clear shining again in a second, and a smile 'twould ha' made thy heart dance to see. And when we had taken our



clary he plucked me by the sleeve and asked me if I'd do a favour for him. So I told him yea, even if it was to go to the Indies for it. And he said 'twas not so far but 'twas to a fairer place and that was—home. And when he found that I was e'en coming back this week, why then I must bear this precious thing for him; he'd ha' come himself, instead, only that his word was passed to be i' London. 'Ods my little life, how thou hast kept me talking! Canst guess, now, how I shall pay thee for thy kindness, thou little copy o' thy father? What is that that hath cost me naught and yet will be richer than gold to thee?"

"A letter—a letter!"

"In good sooth, thou'rt right—'tis that. But marry, why all this pother about a mere bit o' paper wi' characters upon it? There, rest thee there, my saddle, and now my bundles—one—two—three—four—so, to my task. 'Twill be a search, indeed, to find that same letter I warrant me. Is 't i' this poke? Nay, not so. Nor this?—my hat-band belike? What! not there? Whew! suppose it be dropped by the way—a sorry chance—a sorry chance. Here Master Hoppity, Master Ne'er-Stand-Still, help me out wi' this thing that I ha' borne above my heart. There! away wi' thee, thank me no thanks."

"I can never—never—never—thank thee enow," the little lad cried in a shaking voice, as he threw

himself against the man and clung to him in a close embrace.

"Nay, then, strangle me not," Nick Page protested, his honest eyes shining but dimly through the soft mist that o'erspread them, "undo thy hands and scamper, lest my mistress coming will read thee a sermon as long as my arm for such pestilential foolery. Why 'twas no such great thing to bear that letter home, an I ha' done the work o' the Nine Worthies thou couldst not reward me more. In sooth, I be but a foolish, mild man, and so my good wife is ever saying—but there!—A plague upon this dust that hath blinded me and hath got i' my throat besides! Will the rain never come to lay it? What think'st thou, young Shakespeare—it hath grown parlous dark indeed."

"I cry thee pardon, dear Master Page, methinks 'tis passing bright."

"Go to, for a mad lad! Wi' clouds like a sable pall ready to burst i' torrents any moment, how canst say 'tis bright? Out upon thee for a rascally knave. Come, away, away, true heart, I hear my mistress' voice within, an she findeth out I supped at the Crown wi' a play-actor (now the Lord love him!) I am undone."

CHAPTER XVIII

I feel within me
A peace above all earthly dignities,
A still and quiet conscience.

HENRY VIII.

The wheel is come full circle.

KING LEAR.

THERE was no further consideration of Shottery and the dear ones there. The wish to join them was forgotten in the desire to be alone—alone with those new, new thoughts and that wonderful letter anywhere in the fields, with only the voice of Avon slipping past among the sedges underneath a sky that not all the blue and gold of summer could make more fair. Unmindful of the direction he had taken, Hamnet passed along down to the waterside and, turning, followed the river for a short distance on the way toward Charlecote. He loved to wander at will through the pleasant meadows or, anon, keep to the little path that wound up the wooded steep and so on to Sir Lucy's demesne and Bishop's Hampton.

Sometimes long lines of grey willows and green

alders completely hid all glimpses of the river, sometimes the trees fell away and it curved through low-lying lands, one with the grassy margin, or again it was lost to sight by enclosing thickets; but his quick ear was ever heedful of its voice as it went laughing through the rushes along the pebbly shore, or stole by some darkened spot with a sad moan in its murmurs. There was scant music, however, in its sluggish flow that day, though his happy heart would have discovered only its own meaning therein had the boy chanced to listen. But with that little scrap of paper in his keeping which had altered the whole aspect of earth and sky so wonderfully, how could he stop to think of aught else? He had read it again and again as he walked along, and now that he held it thrust into the breast of his jerkin turn where he would he could still see those magic-producing words.

He ran forward gayly, unconscious of the lowering heavens, unconscious of the breathless heat, unconscious, most of all, of the stealthy footsteps following ever behind him, lagging when he lagged and pressing on more quickly when he accelerated his pace. Several times Silver paused and gave utterance to a low, snarling bark, but he was speedily recalled to his usual good behaviour by a word of reproof from his master, and no whit abashed continued on his way, lick-

ing the pendent hand with a gently apologetic tongue.

"I cannot make thee out," Hamnet cried at last as Silver growled more fiercely than he had yet done, "there's naught abroad to vex thee that I wot on. Is 't not enough that I am happier than I ever thought to be, but that thou shouldst seek to mar my content wi' thy grumblings? Nay, I meant not to speak so roundly, dear heart, and I cry thee pardon. Come, come, we'll go no farther—we'll e'en rest here awhile and then hie us home."

As he spoke the boy seated himself on the ground and drew the dog's head up on his breast with a soothing touch.

It was a wild, tangled place; the banks of the river, which narrowed here, were sheer and densely wooded and the stream, uncoiling at their feet, was kept in an almost perpetual darkness, which lent a sense of danger to the uncertain depths. On a warm, fair day it was pleasant enough to turn from the dazzling glow and to halt for a brief space amid these cool shadows and glance down into the eddying waters beneath the overarching trees and catch the sudden points of light where an occasional shaft of sunshine pierced the thinner leaves with its sharp lance, probing its way to the waves and shivering them with its touch, or to see them disturbed from their sullenness and

brightened by a kingfisher's quick dart for its prey. But when the sky was overcast there was something unlovely and sinister in the grey gloom all around. The hush that so often precedes a storm pervaded the lonely spot that July afternoon and gave it an additional air of solemnity. It was as if Nature were holding her breath in anxious expectancy, dreading she knew not what. A great heron, alarmed by the invasion of its solitude, rose from the side of the river and flapped its heavy wings noisily as it moved away farther up stream, flying low above the water. A little willow wren piped in feeble dismay from its nest, and the frightened whir of the reed sparrows among the sedges for a moment disturbed the brooding stillness, then it pressed close again darker and gloomier for the touch of life and motion that had come and gone.

Hamnet, sitting on the bank, was unmindful of any lack of brightness in his surroundings; usually in sympathy with Nature's varying moods he yet failed to perceive that in this instance she was not in accord with his thoughts. The golden haze which invested his fancy lent a fairness to everything. He went on patting Silver's head with a tender hand.

"Thou canst not think what joy hath come to me," he said after a little, a faint tremor in his soft voice, "thou canst not think. A letter, the sweet-

est, the bravest, that ever was writ, I trow, and mine—mine—my very own. Nay I pity thee, dear beast, that thou canst not read it for thyself, but there! I'll pour it into thine ears—thou shalt know every least word o' it. I'll not keep it from thee a minute longer."

He transferred Silver's head to his knee and drew the paper from his breast, kissing it warmly.

"See thou how fair it looketh," he went on; "oh! poor, poor eyes that cannot make it out, my eyes shall serve thee. Listen:

"'Alderliefest: From my heart I write that word, but 'tis most weak indeed. There hath come news to us, my brave boy—my all the world—of the sore trouble thou hast known of late, those wicked lies, which, working on thy gentle nature, turned it to bitterness until thou wert ready to do the villain's bidding. But in the end thine own true heart conquered, as true hearts always must and shall.

"'Now 'fore heaven 'twas a valiant act that run of thine through the night for thy uncle's sake, and I cry thee pardon, sweet, for that I was wroth with thee before I came away. Hadst thou told me all not one least cloud would have lain betwixt us. Nay, never let there be thought of jealousy on thy part. 'Tis a vice to shun, for there is no fair thing that it doth not poison, and every little trifle, to the jealous mind, seemeth more real than the great sun itself.

"'I would I were back in Stratford again that I might wreak my vengeance on thy cozeners, but shun their company—this charge I lay upon thee. I will not make this letter longer than to say that I kiss thy dear lips and to pray God, little lad, that He will have thee in His holy keeping. From the Crown, the——'"

With a deep bark Silver bounded away from the encircling arm, knocking the paper which his master held before him upon the ground in his flight. Hamnet possessed himself of it quickly and smoothed out its crumpled folds, then he thrust it into his breast again. "Thou art overrude, I trow," he cried, half angrily, "and need'st that that will teach thee better manners——"

"Ay, that he doth," a voice back of him growled, "an thou dost na call the beast off, I'll give him summat that will stop his mouth forever."

Hamnet was on his feet in a flash, and turning saw Diccon Hobday trying to ward off Silver with a huge stick, while just behind him he caught a glimpse of Wat Cawdrey's vanishing figure. In a moment the boy's firm hand was on the dog's collar and he had jerked the animal back.

"Down, true heart, down," he commanded, "thou art a trusty friend—come, we'll e'en go home."

"Nay, thou'lt na budge," Diccon cried, his voice gaining in boldness, as the dog unwillingly crouched at his master's feet; "I have summat to say to thee, else I'd na tracked thee hither from Stratford, and go thou shalt na."

"I may not stay, so prithee let us pass."

"And why may'st na stay, thou little whining thing? A week agone thou wert willing enow to

companion me when I could serve thy turn, but now—thou may'st na stay. By the mass, who hath laid behests on thee? Marry, 'tis I, Diccon Hobday, that shall say what thou wilt do."

"Nay, then, I may have naught to do wi' thee, for so my father hath said."

"Thy father? Out upon thee, for a tattling knave!"

"I tattled not, 'twas thine own friend there that told, and more besides; how 'twas all false that thou didst tell about Ned, and 'twas only said so that I should help thee to thine own vengeance."

"Beshrew me, but 'tis a lie, Diccon, an arrant lie!" Cawdrey vociferated stoutly as he crept a trifle nearer, though he still maintained a considerable distance between himself and Silver.

Hamnet cast a look of scorn upon the speaker who was now sworn friends again with the unprincipled fellow.

"'Tis the very truth," he exclaimed, disdainfully.

"So thou'lt slander thy betters, and lie, and break thy word, thou lily-livered, prating thing," Diccon cried, white with anger; "thou'lt pay for thine own sins and thine uncle's into the bargain, or I'll change skins wi' a weasel. Thou needst na think to fright me wi' that lazy cur, I've that here that shall quiet him."

There was a sudden gleam of steel as he finished speaking, and Silver, with a loud yelp of pain, bounded into mid-air only to fall back with a groan, a stream of blood gushing from his shoulder where the knife had gone home.

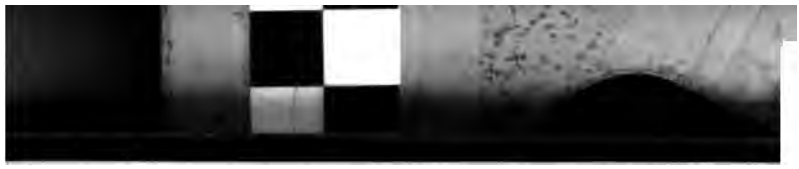
For one moment Hamnet stood as if paralyzed with the horror of what had happened, while everything swam before him in a sickening mist, the next—with a great cry of grief—he threw himself upon his knees by the prostrate animal and tried to stanch the wound with his handkerchief.

"Alack! my dear heart," he sobbed, forgetful of the presence of his enemy, forgetful of all else save the suffering in the loving, upraised eyes, "look at me—tell me thou art not hurt overmuch."

"So, thou gaby, I've found a scheme to make thee cry, eh?" Diccon snarled, as he gave the dog a brutal kick; "methinks a bath in the river would be a cure-all for that wound. Lend a hand, Wat, and we'll cast the beast in and his master after him."

Hamnet laid Silver's head gently upon the ground and sprang to his feet, confronting his taunting foe.

"Go thy ways," he said, brokenly, "thou hast hurt me enow; an thou hadst knifed me, 'twould not have been so bad. Go."



"By my troth," Diccon sneered, "wouldst lord it over me? I'll go when the humour seizeth me, and na before, and that's the end on't. And as for this thing here, why so—and so—I'll spoil 's pretty steps for him if that he ever walketh again. What! thou'lt show thy teeth at me, thou cur? I'll bleed thee more for that complaint."

Hamnet caught the raised arm in his hands and dragged it back with all his pitiful strength.

"Nay, that thou shalt not," he cried; "thou shalt not harm him further—thy quarrel is wi' me. I pray thee, thresh me, as thou saidst, keep to thy word—but harm him no more; he's sore spent as it is, and I fear me—I fear me——"

Diccon dragged his arm free and dealt the lad a blow that sent him sprawling upon the ground.

"Stay there, thou puling baby, I'll serve thee last, so save thy breath to cool thine own porridge. Marry, an it paineth thee to see this cur suffer, thou shalt have a full dose. Hither, Wat."

Cawdrey obeyed the summons with visible reluctance, for to his slow mind it seemed best to let wounded, like sleeping dogs, alone, and he had no wish to feel Silver's teeth even in his weakened state.

"Nay," he urged, "let's be off. Thou'st done enow for one day—give the lad a taste o' thy fists and so away—the rain is coming on."

As he finished speaking he approached Hamnet,

who was again kneeling protectingly by Silver, and cuffed him with such force that he reeled over the dog's body.

"There," he said, triumphantly, "we be quits now—thou and me—wilt take back that lie?"

"Nay," Hamnet returned, dauntlessly, "it was no lie. Thou know'st whether Master Sturley succoured thee or not o' Monday night. Oh! ye think that because my father is away ye can wreak what ill ye will, but have a care. Good Master Page and others beside know already o' your villainy, and if aught o' harm befalleth us here ye'll have short reckoning wi' them."

"The lad's right," Cawdrey cried, in great consternation, retreating at the same time to the thicket. "Come—come—the beast is stirring now, and he'll do for thee an thou'rt na watchful. Prithee—hurt na the lad furder. I' faith, the whole country-side will be upon us for his sake. Thou'st given him drubbing enow, and thou'lt pay dear for this day's sport, but by cock and pie! I be na in it. I was loath to come, and that thou know'st an thou speak'st truth. And thou canst na say I hurt thee, boy, nor thy dog neither, but only that I begged yon fellow to stay his hand. Come away, Diccon, whiles 'tis yet time."

"Ay, run, thou black-hearted traitor," Diccon shouted after the fleeing figure, "save thine own skin, thou hemp-cracking rascal! I'll be even

Hamnet caught the raised arm in his hands and dragged it back with all his pitiful strength.

wi' thee yet for this, though 'twere a pity to do aught to rob the gallows o' its fruit. As for thee," he continued, raining blow after blow upon Hamnet's defenceless body, "beshrew thee, thou'lt na soon forget how one Stratford lad kept his promise."

He threw the half-senseless form from him.

"Now, lie thou there," he snarled, "and when thou canst, crawl home and set the whole town by the ears, 'tis little I care. An they search far and wide they will na find me. The new land is the land for me, and so—farewell."

He strode away with a contemptuous laugh which the freshening breeze bore back to the quiet spot—quiet, save for the rising voice of the river and the occasional cry of some bird hastening home to its nest. Then, on a sudden, a great gust of wind came howling through the long lines of willows and they bent, cowering and shivering, before the fury of the driving storm, which had broken at last.

After a time the keen air blowing upon the little lad revived him. He struggled up into a sitting position and strove to disentangle his thoughts. It was almost impossible to think consecutively with that dull ache all through his body, and the duller ache at his heart. Wait! something was coming back. The next instant he was on his feet, half dazed still, and half blind

in his weakness, but trying to pierce the darkness about him with his anxious glance.

"Silver," he cried, tremulously, "where art thou, true heart?"

The river, roaring by, seemed to still its angry voice, the trees held back their swaying arms as if to listen.

"Silver! Silver——"

Silence again—silence—and then a low whine near at hand, followed by a faint bark.

The river went on indifferently, with its loud tumult, the trees lashed their boughs in redoubled fury. In a moment Hamnet was at the dog's side, his face on the slender muzzle. Silver put out his tongue and attempted to lick the bruised cheek.

"Thou liv'st," the boy cried between his sobs, "thou liv'st——"

CHAPTER XIX

The miserable have no other medicine,
But only hope.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE.

Do you not know I am a woman? when I think I must speak.

AS YOU LIKE IT.

JUDITH raised the latch of Mistress Hathaway's cottage-door and slipped quickly into the house, letting the door slam to back of her with such force that all the casements rattled as violently as if the North wind had descended upon them in its fury.

"Grandam," she shouted, "Grandam."

She paused for a moment to listen. There was no one in the living-room, but from the buttery beyond there came the sound of voices, and thither she directed her steps, calling as she ran.

"Oh! ay, ay," her grandmother replied, testily, being in a peevish humour that morning, "an thou'dst give a body time to speak I'd answer thee. La, I do detest, thou'rt more unmannerly than any boy, 'tis a mercy an my door be left on 's hinge. But come thou hither, thy face is steaming like a yule-tide pudding and as tarnation as

Neighbour Stringer's nose. When wilt give o'er thy madcap behaviours?"

"In truth I did but run the whole way hither, for that I must," the little lass said, breathlessly, "there be sore coil at home."

"Nay then I respected it—I respected it," Mistress Hathaway interrupted, with a triumphant ring in her voice, "my left eye itched all morn, and that thou know'st bodeth weeping, and yestreen, toward sunset or belike a little later, as we were i' the garden a magpie came flying toward us. There was but the one, though I looked and looked for another; and quoth Gillian, 'There be sorrow comin',' and I said, 'Ay, 'tis on the way, but, Tilly-vally, we be all immoral, so there should be no lamentations. 'Tis as the Lord reposeth!' But thy grandfather now— La! he was a goodly man, though full o' confirmities, and so he's gone——"

"Naught aileth my grandfather," Judith cried, "'tis Hamnet that is sick."

"How! Hamnet? Nay, why saidst thou not that sooner? Why didst keep me in dispense? A good lad and a senseless, too, and like his father! Sick, saidst thou? Now what of? Thou'st put me into such tirrits and frights wi' thy news. Come, out wi' it! Feel, Gillian, how I shake an 'twere a very aspen leaf."

"Od's heartlings that do 'ee, Missis."

"Ay, that I do like a whole forest full o' leaves when the wind is up. Thou must tell thy grandam and the rest at home, Jude, how I was infected at the mere suspicion o' the news. I've a tender heart, but there! canst not say what aileth the lad? Looketh he palely, doth his pulsidges beat extraordinarily, hath he lost his appetite incontinently? Hast no tongue that thou canst not use it? Hamnet sick! Hamnet, my little, doting lad! Oh! lackaday, lackaday, we've fallen on parlous times. But dry thine eyes, Gillian wench, and leave off weeping, mouse. Oh! he's dead—he's dead. O' Sunday night there was a winding sheet i' the candle—nay then, Gillian, thou wast by and saw it."

"E'en so, Missis, e'en so, an' thou saidst to I——"

"But Hamnet is not dead," Judith protested. "Ye be cruel to say so. He's only sick, and my Grandam Shakespeare saith he will get well."

"We be i' the hands o' the Lord," Mistress Hathaway returned piously, taking down her apron from her eyes and shaking her head from side to side, "'tis for Him to prohibit! 'Twere well and more christian-like for Mistress Shakespeare to be more hopeless now, and have faith i' Him. A winding sheet i' the candle, a single magpie, my itching eye—nay, they mean no good thing. The lad's past cure—that's the incertainty

o' it! And 'twere good to bring that home to them that think they know more than the Lord above."

"Alack! Grandam, I came hither for thee to help us, and thou frightest me so I must e'en go back."

"Shame upon thee now for that word! I'd not fright a living soul—'tis thou hast frighted me wi' thy delays. Thou'st not told me yet what hath befell the lad—but I must e'en be patient. Am I not his grandam as well as Mistress Shakespeare? And yet, she knoweth, marry, whether he hath caught the inspection, and if the Lord's tokens be on him, or if he hath a 'tidian fever. Speak, lass. Canst not tell a straight story in few words and truly?"

"Oh! Grandam, an thou'dst only hearken——"

"Nay, Gillian, I do detest, leave off that clatter wi' thy pans and sit thee down and, mouse, come a little nearer this ways and so begin."

Judith came close to her grandmother's side.

"Thou knowest when we were here last Saturday how we watched for Hamnet," she began, speaking very rapidly for fear of interruption, "though he had not promised, sure, that he would come, only belike. And then, for that it grew so dark, we hastened home—Mother, Sue and me—running most o' the way, but the rain came pelting down before ever we reached Henley Street, and there was no one within the house when we got

there save only Cicely e'en at her work—she was just back from her holiday. But Hamnet was nowhere within call, and he came not home that night. My grandfather and grandmother were away too, and mother said that belike they'd stayed the night at Uncle Henry's on account o' the storm, and they would come back in the morning, and 'twas even as she said. At first that night she was sore perplexed about Hamnet, and then she thought he'd e'en gone to Shottery —as he'd half said he would, and somehow we'd missed him, for he's a fashion o' going through the thickets after blooms—and that when he came here thou'dst not let him away."

"Ay, I warrant me, I'd not have let him budge. He was ever an indelicate child and a weakly, and I'd have kept him housed willy-nilly. Thy mother should have known that an she had any wit. Nay, sirrah, I'd have said, thou'lt not forth this even, thou'lt stay here while the rain lasteth an 'tis the flood come again. And what wi' posssets and kickshaws I'd ha' made the time pass tediously enow withal—he'd not exchanged it an he could. But he came not hither, and that's the long and short o' it."

"Ay, truly, we know that now; only then, just to think o' his being here out o' the wind and wet—for 'twas a grievous storm—made the house pleasant to us again and we could e'en sleep sweet,

but—" Judith's voice broke and she went on with a sob, "but in the morning betimes, before ever the bidding-bell had sounded or we were ready for church, he came creeping home. Oh! thou'dst scarce have known him, his face was so white and little, and all drawn wi' pain, and his clothes were torn and wet and he had no shirt on's poor back. At first methought 'twas some beggar lad—I was e'en spying forth to see if Hamnet would come—but when he got closer I saw who it was, and out I ran. 'Twas raining some, but softly, too, and when I came up to him I saw that he was half bearing Silver and half leading him, and quoth he:

"'Cheerly, true heart, cheerly now, here's Jude come to meet thee.'

"At that I cried out:

"'Nay, what hath befallen thee, sweet brother, thou'rt sore hurt?' for I could see his arms were all cut and bleeding.

"And he saith:

"'Tis little matter about my hurts, they're naught, 'tis only my true Silver here that suffereth. Help me to bear him better, but gently—gently. So, dear heart, so, we'll not pain thee—we be home at last.'

"And there we were, and all the others came crowding to the door to meet us, but Hamnet had no word to say about himself. When we put Sil-

ver down upon the floor he needs must tend the wound, and Grandam Shakespeare, seeing how he felt, to humour him did say she'd e'en wash it wi' her own hands, and lay salve upon it, if only he would get off his wet clothes and go to bed. But he answered and said:

"'I cry thee pardon, sweet Grandam, I must e'en see to the wound myself; 'twas had for my sake, and Silver, thou know'st, is my very own. Cross me not i' this thing and thou may'st do wi' me as thou wilt.'

"Then he undid the wrappings that were made from his own shirt, torn small, and showed us all a grievous cut on Silver's shoulder, and he bathed it so careful that Silver did not even wince. And when 'twas all made fair, Hamnet turned him to my grandam and gave her thanks."

"Now a weak woman and a fond! An I'd been there I trow no dog should ha' been served before 's master. Mistress Shakespeare hath a soft heart, though verily an thou 'dst thwart her she can be firm enow. And she liketh her own way—as 'tis ever the case wi' such gentle-spoken women—and hath it oft, I warrant me. Well, there's nobody but hath faults, but there! let that pass. Tell me more o' Hamnet; did they rub him and give him a hot posset?"

"Yea, that they did. They put him in my mother's bed, and oh! thou canst not think how

bruised and sore his poor body was. My mother and my grandam were weeping at the sight."

"How came it so—did the lad fall?"

"Nay, nay, 'twas like this. That Saturday afternoon he and Silver had gone out Charlecote way and had rested them by the river in such a lonesome place, it maketh me all shivery just to go by it in the sunshine, for 'tis ever so dark and quiet there. Hamnet had a letter from my father, which good Master Page had brought from Oxford, where my father had given it to his keeping, and whiles my sweet brother was e'en reading o' it, a cruel, big boy set upon him from behind, beating him and wounding Silver full sore. Then, when he had done his wicked will, he went away and for a long time Hamnet knew naught—'twas as if he were asleep."

"Ah, poor heart! Now a swound—afore heaven, a swound!"

"Ay, so my mother saith. When he woke why he needs must find Silver, but 'twas so dark he could scarce see 's hand before 's face, for the rain had come on, so he called, and then Silver made answer, but faintly, too. Whereupon Hamnet crept him to the poor beast and tended him as best he could and helped him to his feet, but Silver could not step, the pain was grievous bad and he was weak, too, for that his wound had bled so much. Then my sweet boy took him in 's

arms and bore him—nay, thou knowest how big the dog is—a little way deeper into the thicket, and there they lay them down together, sheltered from the storm. Hamnet would not leave him, so they waited all through the night for the morning, and then came they home—but slowly—very slowly."

"Now, a piteous tale—a passing piteous tale! Oh, my poor lad! And all night say'st thou—and Saturday night? Nay, 'twas a naughty night! Well do I remember how I said to Gillian, as we hearkened to the drip-drip o' the rain and the roaring o' the wind; 'There be wild work abroad and I'd not let my dearest foe stay wi'out for a king's transom.' And my little lad was all that while i' the woods wi' the wild beasts. Nay, I could have found it in my heart to give them shelter, too, though peradventure 'twould ha' been a sensible thing to do, for they might ha' turned and rended me. But my pretty boy—alack! he hath caught his death. Now, what 'cullion was't that handled him so respitefully? 'Twere best the Master Bailiff were told that he might comprehend the caitiff wretch. How is he called?"

"'Twas Diccon Hobday," Judith answered, "but think not Hamnet told o' 's own free will. When my mother and grandam did question him he said: 'Let be, methinks Silver will mend and

so let be. As for this threshing, why I care not —thou see'st I'd broke my word—nay, seek not to know, I'll not tell his name.' So he would say, but afterwards when he had gone to sleep, why then—the queerest thing!—he began to thresh about with 's arms and talked so strange. Now, 'twas o' Ned, now 'twas Diccon, and anon he'd call father, and pray him not to look sorrowfully. Once he started up in bed, and cried: 'Diccon Hobday, thou shalt not touch my dog, beat me an thou wilt, but spare him.' So then we knew, and my grandfather was exceeding wroth, and he went out wi' a big stick in 's hand, but it came to naught—Diccon Hobday was nowhere to be found.

"And all the while my mother and grandam sat above wi' Hamnet, and anon he fell into a deep sleep. They would not let me in that day, but the next morn I peeped in the room, and—nay, I never saw Hamnet fairer—his cheeks were as red as any rose, and his eyes so bright—verily they were like the stars. But though they looked at me, 'twas as if they did not see me. So I just stopped without and watched. My grandam was there at the side o' the bed, and ever and anon she'd sop his face wi' some cool, sweet-smelling water——"

"Ay, ay, of course, the woman hath some inward touch o' sense! Belike 'twas a diffusion o'

chamomile flowers, for that is good to wash the head and comfort the brain."

"I wot not truly, but soon he went off to sleep, and when he waked again, though his cheeks were still red, his eyes had a different look and he smiled into grandam's face, and tried to sit up, but he could not, so then, all of a sudden, he fell a-weeping.

"And grandam said:

"'Nay, sweet, rest thee awhile, 'twill all come right. Where doth it hurt thee, sweet?'

"And he made answer, though slowly too:

"''Tis but a little pain, I mind it no more than a bee's sting, but yet it yearneth me that I cannot go to Silver. His case is worser than mine, for I can speak, whiles he——' whereupon he did sob and sob.

"Then my grandam went to the stair head and called down a few words to my grandfather, and in another moment — what think'st thou? He came up the stairs bearing Silver in's arms. And when he got to the room he set him on the floor gently, and Silver walked in — but oh, so lame — over to the bed, whereat Hamnet was much pleased, for all that he was crying. Then did my grandfather kneel him down and unbind Silver's shoulder and lay fresh ointment upon it. I know what 'twas—'twas compounded o' hyssop."

"Now I praise heaven the Shakespeares have some inception o' the virtue o' herbs."

"And Hamnet looked on, smiling and saying softly all the while:

"'Good Silver, take heart, lad.'

"Was not my grandfather passing kind? And after that, not once but many times did he tend Silver and bring him food to eat withal. Oh! 'twas a brave physic and worked like a very charm—thou wouldst not guess, but now Silver can go by himself, though it be only to crawl, and he is ever in the room wi' Hamnet, still——" the young voice broke with a deep sob. The next moment the child went on.

"Still Hamnet groweth no better and I marvel why. He just lieth there weak and smiling, and when we ask him how he doth, he ever answers: "'Why, well and happy, only a little tired.' He hath not much to say, and he e'en keepeth my father's letter close in's hand. Yesterday—that's Wednesday—he had not mended and his cheeks were still so red, and toward sundown his eyes took on that bright shining, and then, all through the night he talked and muttered. Nay, we knew not what he meant—over and over again he would say: 'A Shakespeare hath never broke his word! I'll not be the first to do it—' and then he'd cry: "London—Father—London—Father—' So this morn, ere the sun's uprising, my grandfather hied

him to the Swan to give a message to some traveller to London to take to my father there—'twas one my grandam had writ, wherein she said how sick Hamnet was, and bade my father to come."

"Marry, will he do it?"

"Ay, verily, he'd go through fire and water for Hamnet's sake. But, oh! 'twill be so long before he will be here. Sue saith 'twill be four days before ever the letter reacheth him, and then four other days——"

"Nay, then, he will not come."

"Thou dost not know my father; he'll ride his fleetest, I warrant me. But Grandam, wilt help me to make Hamnet well before he cometh? 'Twill pleasure him so. Susanna is with my mother and grandam all the day waiting on them, but there is so little I can do. This morn I ran hither to tell thee all—nay I said not a word to any one—and see! I've brought my bit o' coral along—the same I had when that I was a tiny babe, and I would e'en powder it fine for a potion for Hamnet."

"A potion? Buz! Thou'rt a green girl."

"I pray thee flout me not, they take it for physic at Court, and prize it highest there. 'Tis the very truth, my father told me so. 'Twas Sir Walter Raleigh that brought it back from the new world——"

"Now, Raleigh me no Raleighs! Let them

keep such perditious stuffs to themselves, I've better cure-alls here. There's burnet, now, and loveage and setewall for the inwards, and horehound for bruises, and there's marjoram to comfort both the outside and the in. Belike thy grandam hath not thought on them. I've many other simples confounded here; thou wert wise to come for, peradventure, I can save the lad —though we be i' the Lord's hands after all, and there was that sign i' the candle! I'll set forth wi' thee even now. But first go thou into the garden, Gillian, and gather me some house-leek. Thou 'dst never think, mouse, what good can come from its bruised leaves! When 'tis bound on the forehead 'twill ease the distemperate heat o' the brain in frenzies. And thou may'st get down a bottle o' cowslip wine, too—'tis a good wine and marvellous searching withal. An Hamnet cannot take it, thy grandfather can. Now, I pray heaven we be not too late. Such a child as never was i' this world before—I'll never see his like again—as merry as a critic and so gentle and true and full o' wit withal. And come to this! Nay, 'tis the old should go first, we that be old and o' little use, but the young—out upon these tears! Lend me thy shoulder, child, and bear wi' me. I be very old and foolish, and the little lad is wrapped round my heart—close—close."

CHAPTER XX

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form.

KING JOHN.

ACROSS the grassy valley of the Stour, stretching away to the south, past Shipston, ran the London road. A goodly road in truth. One that happy hearts had travelled and would travel—now God willing—many and many a time. And one, again, that heavy hearts had measured and would measure—now God have pity—beyond all numbering. Laughter and tears—sunshine and shade—pleasure and pain—the very epitome of living! A highway glowing with fair fortune and bright hopes—a highway sombre with dire distress and grievous heart-break, and still above it curved the same sky, or blue, or grey, and underneath its dome the little tale of life went on.

Out of the south, in the chill of an August dawn, a horseman spurred hotly over that same

thoroughfare, his face set and tense, his clothes white with the dust of travel. As he journeyed on, with his steady gaze fixed ever before him, he had no least glance to bestow upon the growing fairness of his surroundings. In vain for him did the morning mists reel before the sun in great, golden spirals, shot with rose, that chased the dark clouds into the west and opened up a pathway for the royal progress. In vain did the distant hills catch a touch of glory upon their filmy crests. In vain did the rippling Stour flash, silver-like, in the clearer light, and the Avon, flowing down to the Severn and the sea, held all in vain some of the day's brightness in its placid waters. In vain did the lark soar high into the heavens, singing its song at the very gates. Nor sun, nor shining hill, nor sparkling stream, nor glittering blade and leaf, nor singing bird had aught to say to the man pressing ever forward.

But, at last, when he had come within sight of the old stone bridge, with its causeway supported on arches above the swampy meads, he halted to breathe his horse and glanced at the slow-flowing river as at a familiar friend, and at the little town, just waking from its slumbers, on the opposite shore, where the spire of Trinity rose from its bower of trees. He drew a deep sigh of relief. With Stratford there in front of him hope leaped again in his breast and thrust back with a mighty

lance all those grim thoughts of apprehension and sadness that had made every mile of his terrible journey seem a score in its slow unfolding. And thus thrilled he could see with clearer eyes.

The horse snuffed the freshening river breeze with eager nostrils, seeming to gain new vigour with each inhalation, while the rider, in his turn, felt a sudden sense of peace descend upon him as if some of the tranquillity and beauty of the young day had crept into his tormented soul. Nay, all was well of a surety, he told himself, for the night was past. He bent and patted the steed with an encouraging touch as he set him once more in motion and went dashing over the long, grey bridge, the flying hoofs breaking the sleeping stillness all around.

Old Raven, with his broom and shovel borne aloft upon his shoulder, came scrambling up the causeway from the Stratford side with what haste he could muster. It was early yet for work, but at almost any time, now, travellers might be starting forth on their journey Londonward, and it behooved him to speed their departure with a civility which often received its proper recompense in coin of the realm, though oftenest only in words of cheer—sorry substitutes, to the cleaner's way of thinking. With his lynx-like eyes he had noted from afar the tiny cloud of dust spreading

along his special province which heralded the coming of a horseman, and his old heart beat triumphantly as panting, but still in time, he took up his position a little at one side, in an attitude of arrested industry. And yet, notwithstanding his seductive phrases of welcome, he might have been a part of the stone guard-wall which testified to Sir Hugh's public spirit for all the notice that was taken of him and his outstretched hand.

"Now, by 'r la' kin it be Wully Shaxper," he exclaimed in dismay, "an' a had nowt for I." He cast an anxious glance in the direction of the vanishing rider, to make sure that he was not dreaming. "Ay, it be Wully," he continued, in utter mystification, "but what be comed to he? Summat's happed as sure as shinin'—it be the fust time a ever passed I by loike that."

Meanwhile Will Shakespeare, bending low to his saddle bows and urging his good horse forward, turned into Back Bridge Street. Early as it was, some shopmen were at their stalls in Middle Row, getting ready for what business the day might bring, setting forth their wares or casting up the tallies which they had chalked upon their wooden shutters or doors on the yesterday. Several of them turned in stupid wonderment at sight of the flying figure, then, as stolidly, they turned again to the petty affairs in hand, their minds as unruffled by the unexpected passing as

a stagnant pool, sleeping beneath its coverli l of green, is disturbed by the flight of a bird far above.

There were other signs of life abroad; two or three garrulous house-wives were sauntering slowly toward the public pump, a little goose-girl loitered along at one side, singing lustily and paying scant heed to her waddling charges, and several workmen, with their mattocks across their shoulders, were dawdling to their tasks in the near-lying fields. There was no thought of hurry or worry anywhere this fresh, bright morning, save in the breast of the traveller from far-away London town.

He turned into Henley Street and there, before him, was the home he loved. Smoke from the chimney—thank God! An open casement—thank God!—and someone already stirring in the garden. Someone, perhaps, who had been up all night in a sick-room and had come out among the growing things to breathe in the sweet, soft air, or belike—since all was well—to gather a handful of lettuce leaves for the morning's meal. He reined in his horse, smiling a little to himself. He must wait for his foolish heart to stop its tumultuous beating—his anxiety had made a very woman of him. And so, halting, he glanced around with eager eyes.

How fair it was! How trim Master Lane's

hedge looked, and what a fine showing his garden made! There was the Quineys' house close by, and this was Master George Badger's, while just around in Henley Lane rose the tall elms that shaded the dwelling-place of good Nicholas Page —now Heaven bless him a thousand thousand times! Back came Will Shakespeare's roving eyes to his own home garden; he urged his tired horse a step nearer. Nay, he'd make sure who it was abroad there betimes—Mother, Wife, the little girls, or the kitchen wench. What was that low-stooping figure doing there by the garden wall? Not smelling the flowers—not picking lettuce —not—Oh, God! Oh, God!

He stared straight before him—all the blood gone from his face—at that swift, darting shape bending down by the straw-bound hives along the wall, bending down with the fluttering shred of black in her hands, and whispering something to the quiet inmates within. It was Cicely telling the bees.

And still he sat there staring before him, dumb, helpless, chilled to the marrow, but not sightless. He could still see the garden and that stooping form, the softly waving trees, the nodding flowers so dazzlingly gay, and beyond them the house—home!—where the smoke curled from the chimney and where all the windows—not one alone—and the doors were flung wide. A red-breast flashed

for a moment in the sun—a vivid rush of scarlet —as it darted across to Nicholas Lane's hedge, with its twittering note, and from somewhere in the near distance there came the sound of a school-boy's happy call.

Then, on a sudden, it was very dark. A great blindness fell upon the watcher; he could see naught in the confused blur of earth and sky. The pleasant landscape held no faintest hint of beauty or peace, though the sun—which is the saddest thing in all this world—went on with its cruel shining.

The family had gathered in the living-room—all there together save one—and the air was heavy with the sound of weeping. Will Shakespeare paused for a moment, trembling on the threshold.

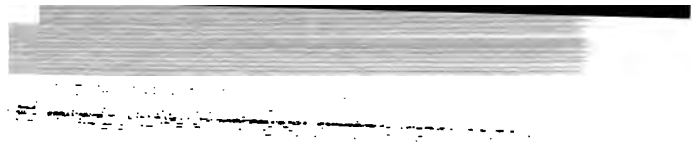
"I—I—tarried not," he said, brokenly, "but—I —come—too—late. Nay, stay me not now."

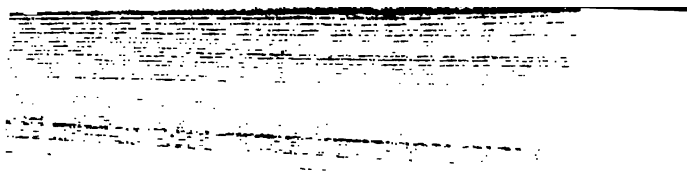
He put them by with a hasty hand, he did not even seem to see them as he crossed the room with his white, hopeless face thrown back, and his dry eyes staring fixedly before him.

They listened to his slow steps creeping up the creaking staircase, as if some heavy weight had been laid upon him which made it impossible for him to climb faster. When he had reached the top there was a momentary pause—for strength —for courage—who could say? then those drag-

ging foot-falls went across the entry, and then there was the closing of a door.

And still listening, they heard poor, maimed Silver crawl slowly up, in his turn—step by step—and fling himself upon the floor outside of that closed door, with a low moan of grief.





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